

The Last One at the Wedding

The Last One at the Wedding by Wendy Willis is a sharp and poignant exploration of love, loss, and the complexities of relationships. Set during a wedding, the novel follows a character who finds herself reflecting on her own life choices as she observes the couple and the dynamics of those around her. Through keen observations and introspection, the story delves into themes of personal growth, the passage of time, and the bittersweet nature of change.

Title Page

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Chapter 2.

In this chapter of "The Last One at the Wedding," the narrator reflects on their tumultuous relationship with their daughter, Maggie. After Maggie moves to Boston post-college, the narrator co-signs her lease for a basement studio apartment and agrees to help with her rent for the first year. Despite their intentions, tension builds as Maggie works at Dr. Cell Phone, owned by Oliver Dingham, a man seemingly infatuated with her. The narrator fears for Maggie's safety and her potential romantic involvement with Oliver, pushing her to find a different job, but Maggie dismisses these concerns, believing any tech-related job would bolster her résumé.

One fateful Saturday morning, Maggie arrives unexpectedly, expressing homesickness after driving all night. Her visit brings a brief respite filled with family activities, but a sense of anxiety lingers. Later, Maggie subtly asks the narrator to lie about what time she arrived, insisting on an alibi that contradicts the truth. When confronted, she insists it isn't lying, creating an atmosphere of distrust between them. Their relationship further deteriorates, leading to Maggie speeding away after an unsettling exchange.

The following days are tense as the narrator attempts to prepare for an impending crisis surrounding a fire at Dr. Cell Phone, linked to Oliver Dingham. The narrator is approached by Leonard Summers, an investigator who reveals the fire was no accident and raises concerns about Maggie's job and her connection to Oliver. He suggests that Maggie may be implicated in the incident, including insinuations about her character and past behaviors. The narrator struggles with the reality of Maggie's choices while feeling a pressing obligation to protect her.

The narrative captures the complexity of parental love, trust, and the painful decisions parents must make for their children. As Maggie's choices become increasingly questionable, the narrator faces a moral dilemma: whether to lie to save her from the consequences of her actions or to confront the painful truth of what has occurred. The chapter concludes with an imminent clash between familial loyalty and the consequences of deceit, leaving an emotional weight that suggests future conflicts to resolve.

Chapter 3.

In the chapter titled "The Last One at the Wedding," the narrative begins with Maggie joining Errol and Gerry at a chaotic scene by the lake, where the body of a woman, Gwendolyn, has been discovered. The woman's robe is billowing in the water, creating an unsettling image reminiscent of an angel. While the guards attempt to retrieve the body, the guests, including Khalani who is recording the event with her iPhone, maintain a respectful distance. Gerry quickly addresses Khalani's behavior, reminding her and her friends of their confidentiality agreements.

Hugo, a figure of authority at the scene, kneels beside the deceased and confirms the identity of Gwendolyn. Her face is a haunting sight, with eyes open and an expression of surprise. As he examines her, the narrative reveals that Maggie had just seen Gwendolyn earlier that night, where Gwendolyn had been alone and seemingly determined to enter the water despite warnings that swimming had ended for the evening.

Maggie shares her observations, noting a suggestion from Aidan that Gwendolyn was known to use heavy drugs, implying that substance use might have played a part in the tragedy. The chapter reveals a tension between Maggie's perception of drug use and her father Errol's attempt to probe into Gwendolyn's state the previous night.

A guard arrives with a blanket to cover Gwendolyn's body, and Maggie's attention shifts to strange red marks on the woman's neck. Hugo examines these with concern, suggesting they may have been caused by an object in the lake. He instructs his men to clear the area of the onlookers to maintain order before calling the police and medical examiner.

Maggie volunteers to inform Aidan about Gwendolyn's passing, showcasing her emotional commitment despite the heavy burden of the news. The chapter concludes with an underlying tension, as the protagonist suspects that Aidan may already be aware of Gwendolyn's fate, hinting at deeper relationships and secrets as the investigation into the incident looms.

Chapter 5.

In "The Last One at the Wedding," we meet Frank Szatowski, who has spent his entire life in the small town of Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, with a brief exception for his service in the U.S. Army. Frank is driving to Boston to visit his daughter, Maggie, who lives in a luxurious sky-high apartment with her fiancé, Aidan Gardner, a seemingly affluent young man. As Frank travels, he reminisces about his hometown's charm with its outdoor activities and seasonal festivals, contrasting it with the grandeur of Boston.

While nearing his destination, Frank stops at a Super 8 in Worcester for a budget-friendly stay. He picks up flowers and cookies for Maggie, reflecting his overzealous yet affectionate desire to support her in her new life. Upon arrival in Boston, Frank encounters a tall, modern tower named Beacon Plaza, which surprises him with its corporate ambiance rather than a residential feel. He interacts with Olivia, a receptionist, who impressively knows his name thanks to Maggie's arrangements.

After checking his vehicle, Frank is whisked upstairs in an elevator without buttons, leading to a magnificent apartment where he finds Maggie, seemingly transformed and glowing with happiness. Maggie, dressed stylishly and holding a glass of wine, welcomes her dad, revealing that she moved in with Aidan after they got engaged.

As they embrace, Frank's nostalgia hits him, prompting memories of their old games and the bond they once shared. Maggie introduces her father's attention to Aidan's artwork—a series of striking portraits. When

Aidan finally arrives, he is charming despite the visible signs of a recent mugging, which he discusses with casual candor, emphasizing the harrowing events he faced.

They shift the conversation to Aidan's career and artistic vision, whose paintings are inspired by the characters he observes in Boston. Amid the dinner preparations by a private chef, Frank scans their breathtaking view of the city and the unexpected wealth Maggie has entered through her relationship with Aidan. As they discuss the upcoming wedding, Maggie dispels any tension regarding past misunderstandings, seeking to focus on their future together, while Frank wrestles with feelings of gratitude and apprehension about her new life. The chapter beautifully balances humor with a poignant father-daughter reunion, setting the stage for the unfolding family dynamics and emotional journey ahead.

Chapter 9.

Errol Gardner appeared as the quintessential blend of charisma and fitness, exuding confidence with his tall, tanned frame and signature outfit. Upon meeting Frank Szatowski, he jovially pronounced Frank's last name theatrically, welcoming him exuberantly and inquiring about his drive to Osprey Lodge. Frank noted the lodge's grandeur and was hurried upstairs by Aidan, Errol's son. Errol's office was impressive, adorned with fine woodwork, showcasing his exquisite taste.

In a congenial atmosphere, Frank presented a bottle of bourbon as a gift, referencing Errol's love for it profiled in **New England Living**. Their conversation flowed, with Errol displaying a frankness about a prior interview he had disliked, yet appreciated the bourbon getting recognition. Gerry Levinson, Errol's older friend, joined the gathering, further enhancing the warm welcome. As drinks were poured, Errol toasted to the happy wedding occasion and praised Maggie, noting she was a smart and rare talent.

Frank reflected on his late wife Colleen fondly during their conversation, sharing memories of their early relationship amid his service in the army. The bourbon eased his nerves, leading to an open discussion about Errol's wife, Catherine, who suffered from debilitating migraines, highlighting the heavy toll it took on their lives. Despite Errol's hope for her recovery, she had not been able to participate in the festivities.

The mood shifted when the name Dawn Taggart surfaced, bringing a tense silence. Gerry inquired about a mail item Frank had received, prompting him to produce an envelope that sparked interest and suspicion regarding its content. As they examined a photo included inside, Aidan reacted with alarm, claiming it was a fake. The discussion explored the implications of this photo, intertwined with Aidan's personal experiences involving Dawn, a previous encounter under inconclusive terms.

Aidan recounted a meeting with Dawn, which occurred under chance circumstances following a flat tire. Their fleeting connection was marked by references to pop culture that didn't resonate, and he had last seen her after a single dinner date. As they investigated the family's potential motives for blame, Gerry suggested a financial angle, signifying a threat of a civil suit akin to the O. J. Simpson case. Tensions rose surrounding the pressures Aidan faced while trying to clarify his innocence, culminating in revelations about his weekend with Margaret during Dawn's disappearance. This intertwining of personal and legal turmoil painted a complex picture of the predicament involving family dynamics, expectations, and the trials of love .

Map of Osprey Cove

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Chapter 3.

In the chapter of "The Last One at the Wedding," the narrator wakes up in a hospital after a car accident, grappling with injuries including a broken arm and ribs. He's relieved that no one else was harmed, but his long-standing record of accident-free driving was shattered. He faces uncertainty about his job as a UPS driver; while a union representative reassures him, a corporate representative hints that the investigation into the accident is ongoing and his future remains unclear. A reporter visits, suggesting management's negligence contributed to his accident due to poor working conditions, but he takes ownership of his mistake, insisting on his training and responsibility.

After three nights in the hospital, he returns home to a life drastically altered. Left with nothing to do, he becomes frustrated with daytime television and spirals into negativity, isolating himself. The accident weighs heavily on his mind, especially the mysterious encounter with a stranger who resembled his daughter Maggie's friend Aidan, leaving him with guilt for not seeking clarity.

When his sister Tammy calls, asking him to watch Abigail, his niece, he initially declines, feeling unfit due to his injury. However, he wakes to find Abigail there and reluctantly agrees to take care of her. They spend their time together watching documentaries, with Abigail increasingly asserting her presence in his home. He notices changes in her since they last met, highlighting her growth and her resilience.

They reminisce about family memories as Abigail begins exploring Maggie's old belongings, particularly stuffed animals. The narrator unexpectedly suggests that Abigail take whatever she wants, recognizing the void left by Maggie's absence. Despite a sense of despondency, an urge to escape his dark thoughts prompts him to take Abigail out for an adventure. They journey through familiar places, including the site of his accident and personal landmarks from his past, seeking to create new memories.

Their explorations lead to a bonding experience as they indulge in various activities culminating in a memorable trip to a canoeing site on the Delaware River. There, they navigate the gentle waters together, fostering a connection that momentarily alleviates the narrator's anxiety about the accident and its ramifications. As summer nears its end, he wishes for more time to spend with Abigail, realizing the importance of cherishing these moments.

Chapter 1.

In the early hours of Thursday, I found myself awake at three-thirty, wrestling with memories of past failures as a parent since my fallout with Maggie. I often reflect on my flaws in parenting, like the moment we traveled to Busch Gardens for Maggie's seventh birthday. Maggie realized she had left her cherished Mr. Panda Pal at a highway rest stop two hours into our journey. Despite her pleas to turn back, I insisted on continuing without him, believing I could replace the stuffed animal once we arrived. Instead of enjoying the trip, Maggie was engulfed in worry for Mr. Panda, ruining our weekend and straining our relationship.

However, amidst the failures, I cherish brighter memories. I recall the five times I helped Maggie paint her bedroom as she explored new colors. I also taught her self-defense techniques, ensuring she felt empowered and prepared as she approached driving. When Maggie got her license on the first attempt, I felt proud of the role I played in her confidence.

As I dwelled on these moments, I was reminded of the times Maggie confided in me, particularly one morning after she had been unusually withdrawn. To uncover her concerns, I took her to Waffle House, a place with sentimental value since her mother had once worked there. As we sat together, I tried to engage her in conversation, yet she initially brushed me off. When she revealed she had gotten her period, I felt a mix of surprise and pride at her independence. She managed this milestone without my assistance, having learned from friends and figured out how to procure what she needed.

Relieved, I offered to pay for the supplies so she wouldn't use her allowance, but I stumbled when trying to discuss "the equipment." Our conversation shifted to the costs of dining, highlighting her newfound awareness of money as we chatted about tipping. I explained I was generous to the waitstaff in honor of her mother's values, suggesting that such gestures might bring her mother joy. The morning exemplified a crucial moment in our evolving relationship, filled with laughter and pride in Maggie's growth .

Chapter 6.

In this chapter of "The Last One at the Wedding," Frank Szatowski arrives at Beacon Tower to visit his daughter, Maggie. Packing only an overnight bag in hopes of a warm reunion, his expectations feel misguided. As he enters the lobby, he is greeted pleasantly by Olivia, the receptionist, and he moves to the penthouse where Maggie awaits, dazzling in a new gown. However, he immediately senses a change in the atmosphere, perceiving that friends like Errol Gardner and Gerry Levinson have gathered for a more pressurized conversation than he anticipated.

Maggie introduces Frank to her guests, presenting a facade of normalcy, despite evident tensions running beneath the surface. The group hints at complicated, unsettling matters regarding a map Frank had found and brought with him; it seems the map holds secrets that could impact their lives. Conversation turns and confirms suspicions that Frank's family ties bind them all in a shared dilemma centered on a young girl named Abigail Grimm—who was incidentally the one to discover the map. The adults express concern about her safety, revealing that the discovery of this information could have serious consequences.

As tensions rise among the group, Frank attempts to protect Abigail, asserting the need for her safety, but grappling with his inadequacy as a father to Maggie. Amidst the increasing pressure, Frank realizes he has inadvertently become entangled in dangerous dynamics, as Maggie seems resigned to the necessity of a harsh decision regarding Abigail's fate.

In a desperate move, Frank communicates with his sister Tammy to warn her, urging her to evacuate Abigail from their home. While the situation spirals, Frank's emotions surge, confronted by regret and the rapid unfolding danger around him. He recalls Maggie's childhood innocence, amplifying the painful recognition of their strained relationship. Ultimately, when conflict erupts during a high-stakes moment, Frank seizes an opportunity to escape, tearing through the building's stairwell amidst chaos.

As Frank pushes outside, he experiences an array of overwhelming feelings—the sirens and confusion envelop him. The chapter culminates with Frank evading capture, leaving him both physically separated from his daughter and emotionally distanced from the family structure he desperately wishes to protect.

Chapter 1.

Morning light filled the room as the protagonist struggled to wake up, wracked by pain. Squinting against the sun, he brushed away a spider lingering on his pillow but chose to ignore another one on the bedpost. Memories were hazy; he had no recollection of returning to his cottage or that night's events. The last clear memory involved an intense confrontation with Errol Gardner. The situation went from confusion to panic as

he realized the state he was in—clothing stained and hair matted with dried blood. Suddenly, nausea hit him, leading to an unfortunate episode of vomiting.

In the bathroom, the protagonist fought through the pain in his head while observing his disheveled appearance in the mirror. He felt the urgency to leave Osprey Cove, knowing he had to rescue his daughter, Maggie. After adjusting the time on his Timex to Eastern Standard Time, he hastily packed a suitcase, ignoring the spiders in the closet. The desire to leave was overpowering and imminent.

Before he could escape, he listened to a voice message from Vicky, warning him about the Gardners' possible dangerous secrets and urging him to contact her. Just as he processed the message, his sister Tammy appeared, startled by his condition. In a rush, he insisted they needed to leave. Tammy, however, reassured him that Maggie was fine and preparing for her wedding to Aidan Gardner, presenting a stark contrast to his turbulent mindset.

In disbelief, he shared the troubling details about the Gardners, claiming that Catherine Gardner had murdered Dawn Taggart in a fit of madness. As his sister absorbed this, she hesitated to accept his claims, suggesting that it was not their business and that families have secrets. The protagonist, frustrated, pressed on about Maggie's precarious choices and her troubling relationship with Errol Gardner, her future father-in-law. Tammy, grounded in practicality, argued that Maggie was capable of making her own decisions, prompting a bittersweet reflection on past family dynamics and choices.

The conversation escalated as the protagonist pleaded for action, whereas Tammy, burdened by her life choices, sought stability over conflict, starkly contrasting their approaches to family loyalty and moral responsibility. She ultimately urged him to clean up and prepare for Maggie's impending arrival, emphasizing their need for understanding rather than conflict.

Chapter 9.

The rehearsal dinner for Margaret and Aidan's wedding celebrated Lobster Night, complete with hand wipes, checkered red-and-white napkins, souvenir lobster crackers, and custom-printed bibs that read "MARGARET AND AIDAN'S WEDDING: A CLAWS FOR CELEBRATION!" The seating arrangement placed me at a table with Tammy, Maggie, Aidan, Errol, and Abigail, with an empty chair reserved for Catherine Gardner, whose attendance was uncertain.

As Aidan settled between Maggie and Abigail, I expressed my condolences for Gwendolyn. Aidan explained that Gerry's office was trying to contact Gwendolyn's family, but they faced difficulties since Gwendolyn was raised by a late grandmother, leaving them unsure of who to reach out to. Maggie attempted to shift everyone's focus back to the dinner. While Tammy was eager for lobster, Abigail hesitated, finding them intimidating. Aidan encouraged her, emphasizing New England's reputation for the best lobsters. When the lobsters arrived, he patiently demonstrated how to eat them, engaging Abigail in conversations about geography, a sign of his affection.

The atmosphere was relaxed, featuring a jug band playing lighthearted tunes. Attendees enjoyed beer responsibly, likely mindful of the preceding night's mishap. The tradition of toasting the couple added a fun element, with Abigail applauding enthusiastically after each kiss shared by Maggie and Aidan, finding joy in the ritual.

Errol's speech was brief, acknowledging the absence of his wife due to health issues but celebrating Maggie's qualities and her marriage with Aidan. His heartfelt words drew a standing ovation and emotional responses from many, including my sister. Shortly after, Aidan received a text, which momentarily distracted him, but he quickly returned to engaging with Abigail about geographical wonders.

As the toasts continued, I found it challenging to concentrate; my thoughts kept reverting to a lingering mystery involving Aidan and an altered photograph with Dawn Taggart. Despite my understanding that Maggie regarded the image as manipulated, I was puzzled over the motivations behind it and the capability of the individuals involved. Meanwhile, Gerry and Sierra shared their marriage secrets, while Aidan sat distracted, indicating preoccupations of his own. Lying beside him was a key, symbolic of the answers to the questions that haunted me.

Chapter 10.

In this chapter, the wedding reception unfolds on a lively lawn, packed with nearly a hundred guests and a jazzy atmosphere as a trio plays "It Had to Be You." The scene is bustling with caterers quickly setting up additional tables and a long buffet displaying a feast of prime rib, crab cakes, corn on the cob, salads, and various cocktail stations. Among the flurry, the protagonist, Frank Szatowski, spots a familiar bartender from a previous encounter.

As Frank navigates the crowd, he searches for his daughter, Maggie, feeling an urgency to discuss Aidan's past and the recent unsettling conversation he had about the missing Dawn Taggart. After locating Maggie, she appears cheerful, having just arranged transportation for the event. However, Frank insists on having a private conversation first, leading them to an elevated table where they can talk away from prying eyes.

The conversation quickly escalates into a tense discussion about Aidan and the circumstances surrounding Dawn Taggart's disappearance. Frank learns that Aidan claimed to be in Maggie's apartment during the weekend of Dawn's disappearance, contradicting her previous statements that Aidan was far away. Raising concerns about the validity of Aidan's alibi, Frank presses Maggie for clarity but faces staunch defenses from her, arguing that Aidan is innocent and that her relationship with him is genuine.

As the discussion continues, tensions rise, especially when Frank reveals that he spoke to Dawn's uncle, who suspects Aidan may have been involved. Maggie dismisses her father's worries, insisting that a drunken conversation should hold less weight than her conviction in Aidan's character. Frustrated by Maggie's stubbornness and dismissive nature, Frank pushes for answers, suspecting that Aidan is hiding something significant, possibly connected to the case of Dawn.

Just as matters escalate, the wedding host, Errol Gardner, interrupts with good intentions, offering Maggie a glass of wine, prompting a brief distraction from the intense father-daughter exchange. As the festivities continue, Errol takes Maggie away for introductions, leaving Frank to grapple with his concerns and the unresolved mystery surrounding Aidan and Dawn. The moment encapsulates the complexities of familial relationships amidst a backdrop of love, suspicion, and the looming shadows of an unsolved mystery.

Chapter 1.

In the early hours, the protagonist wakes to the irritating sensation of spiders crawling on him. After switching on the lamp, he finds multiple spiders in his room and spends time squashing them, feeling a distinct lack of comfort as he contemplates multiple worries on his mind. Principal among these concerns are the strange happenings surrounding his daughter, Dawn's uncle's unsettling question about his mental state, and a fake photo of Dawn.

As his thoughts spiral into a re-examination of his parenting failures, he reflects on past regrets, particularly the pressure he placed on his daughter Maggie over minor issues like dinner etiquette and her academic performance. A crucial memory surfaces regarding an incident when Maggie, at seventeen, sought his help to buy a vegan suede jacket priced at \$350 from an online retailer. He recalled disputing the coat's exorbitant

price, believing it to be a gimmick, but ultimately relenting to her insistence and using his credit card.

When the jacket was supposedly delivered, it disappeared from their porch—likely snatched by a porch pirate, a real issue in the shipping industry. After realizing the jacket was lost, he contacted the retailer explaining the situation, which resulted in a replacement jacket for Maggie. However, weeks later, the protagonist encounters Priya, one of Maggie's friends, who reveals that she bought the extra jacket Maggie had received by mistake.

This revelation hits him hard, triggering feelings of profound disappointment. Upon confronting Maggie about her actions at dinner, her casual dismissal of the seriousness of the matter leads to a heated argument where she justifies her actions through various excuses. The tension escalates, resulting in threats to report her to the police, which both he and she know he wouldn't follow through with. Eventually, she was made to donate the jacket to Goodwill, an act that infuriated her for an extended period as she defiantly avoided wearing winter coats thereafter.

Now, with a complex strain in their relationship, he recognizes the long-term effects of his past parenting choices and prepares to navigate this ongoing conflict cautiously, hoping to mend the relationship despite the brewing tensions surrounding his daughter's interactions with Gwendolyn and Brody Taggart. In these restless moments, the protagonist remains wide awake, mulling over everything.

Chapter 5.

In this chapter of "The Last One at the Wedding," the atmosphere is tense and somber as the aftermath of a tragedy unfolds on the beach. EMTs and police officers are present, working alongside the security team from Osprey Cove. Observing from a distance, the protagonist recounts the scene where a stretcher remains parallel to Gwendolyn's body, with the medics debating how to carry her away.

Errol Gardner approaches, carrying a cup of coffee. He discusses Aidan, Gwendolyn's apparent trajectory, and the need for answers from the medical examiner, who isn't expected to provide a report for some time. Conversations shift to the canceled wedding plans, but Errol insists on proceeding with the day's schedule, including a hike to Cormorant Point, emphasizing resilience in the face of grief.

While lingering by the beach, the protagonist notices the relaxed demeanor of Gerry and Hugo conversing with officials, indicating a strange disconnect with the gravity of the situation. There's a moment of levity as the protagonist receives a supportive text from Vicky about his wedding toast, which prompts a call to her. He shares the shocking news of Gwendolyn's death, and their conversation dives deeper into the chaotic events surrounding it, including revelations about Aidan Gardner's relationships and the odd circumstances of recent happenings.

Vicky speaks candidly about parental blindness in troubled situations, recalling her struggles with her daughter, Janet. This reflection stirs emotions in the protagonist as he expresses concerns about Aidan's involvement in the girls' troubles. The conversation reflects on the nature of denial among parents and the difficulty of recognizing problematic behavior in their children.

As the chapter concludes, the protagonist feels overwhelmed but resolves to dig deeper into the situation, acknowledging the dangers of his inquiries. The chapter sets a suspenseful and complex tone, highlighting themes of grief, denial, and parental instinct against a backdrop of tragedy and impending nuptials.

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.

Aidan didn't speak again until we were outside Osprey Lodge, leading me into the dark pine trees where I had met Gwendolyn. He confronted me about my phone theft, to which I apologized, confessing I felt half-informed. Aidan warned me about knowing more, referring to a mysterious "they" that posed a danger. He revealed Hugo's dark past with connections to human trafficking and criminal charges, and expressed his own paranoia about Hugo watching me. I reassured Aidan that his mother needed immediate help, suggesting he should get her real treatment. He dismissed my concern, explaining that her mental breakdown following a visit from Dawn Taggart was beyond simple therapy and may lead to prison if dealt with openly.

I sought clarification about Maggie's involvement, but Aidan maintained her safety and the impossibility of her revealing wedding truths due to my perceived inability to handle them. A sudden change overtook him as he shifted back towards the wedding festivities, leaving me alone with burning questions. He insisted I return to the party, but I resolved to confront Maggie, confident that she held the truths I desperately needed.

Retrieving the Osprey Cove map from my pocket, I slipped into the woods where I hoped Maggie was staying. Navigating the dark forest, I found the trail challenging and felt the oppressive atmosphere heightening my anxiety. The winding path and encroaching shadows sharpened my instincts, making me feel I was being watched. After a long trek, I finally spotted the Hummingbird cottage, its faint lights beckoning me.

Upon entering, I sensed another presence. I grasped a wine bottle for protection as I pushed open the slightly ajar door, only to witness a shocking scene: Maggie in a vulnerable state, and Errol Gardner, a threat, looming over her. My instincts kicked in, and in a blind fury, I attacked him. Struggling to subdue Errol, I was momentarily distracted by Maggie's scream, which intensified my resolve. Just as I was about to gain

complete control, a sharp blow to my head left me dazed, and my last sight was of Hugo rushing in to intervene. In that moment, I realized Maggie had seen him and remained silent. The darkness enveloped me as I lost consciousness.

Chapter 6.

In the chapter "The Last One at the Wedding," the narrator reflects on the events during a wedding weekend, beginning with a chaotic lunch involving Abigail, the narrator's sister. Unfazed in her food-consuming frenzy, Abigail finds herself overwhelmed, leading to a mess that the narrator, Frankie, predicts. This behavior sparks a debate between Frankie and Tammy, where Tammy expresses frustration at Frankie's irritable demeanor. Following the lunch debacle, tensions ease when they head upstairs to unpack.

Frankie describes their accommodations at a lavish venue and expresses delight at the spacious master suite which features a king-size bed, a private bathroom, a large flat-screen TV, and a balcony with a view of Lake Wyndham. Meanwhile, Tammy is in a similarly grand suite next door, and Abigail occupies a whimsical room adorned with nautical themes, expressing her excitement over the bunk beds.

As Frankie unpacks, they note an event schedule for the wedding weekend, which highlights various activities including a welcome dinner, a group hike, and the main wedding event, making it sound both engaging and intimidating. Feeling anxious, particularly about meeting the Gardners, Frankie opts not to explore and instead focuses on crafting a toast for Maggie, the bride.

Despite attempts to perfect the toast, Frankie struggles with self-doubt and finds it challenging to articulate genuine sentiments without sounding cheesy. Instead of giving into frustration, they reach out to Vicky, a friend, for help. She encourages Frankie, promising to review the toast and provide constructive feedback, alleviating some of the pressure. As they send the toast to Vicky, a sudden scream from Abigail signals that all is still not calm in their eventful weekend.

Chapter 7.

Frank arrives at Supercuts after hours, desperate to see Vicky, despite knowing it's closed. With his Jeep on fumes and feeling the pressure of the moment, he runs into a strip mall. Outside, kids skateboard while he frantically knocks on the locked door. Vicky initially ignores him, suggesting he return in the morning. Frank insists he needs to speak with her—there's something serious regarding Maggie that he must explain. Despite her corporate policy adherence, Frank reveals urgency, admitting he can't go home and needs help, which finally grabs her attention.

As skateboarders start to pay attention to the commotion, Frank reassures them he isn't in need of police involvement, having already spoken to his sister who is safe with Abigail at a hotel. He appeals to Vicky by showing her a hard drive, promising that once she hears what's on it, things will make sense. Intrigued, Vicky unwinds from her aloofness, using her keys to let him in while securing the salon behind him. Their vintage computer is slow, but he connects the hard drive and opens a file filled with cryptic names leading to an audio conversation.

The first recording that plays reveals a discussion between Aidan, Maggie, and others regarding a structured relationship plan. Confusion quickly sets in as Vicky realizes the implications of the content they are listening to, particularly regarding Aidan's connection to Maggie. As they sift through the recordings, Frank reveals a complex web of interpersonal relationships and emotional struggle intertwined with secrecy. Vicky pushes Frank for explanations, urging him to provide context, particularly about the tumultuous dynamics hinted within the tapes.

Their session is tense, leaving both characters on edge, with Frank promising to divulge everything soon. The chapter highlights intense emotions and the weight of the complicated relationships as they dig deeper into the hidden conversations that threaten to unravel multiple lives.

Chapter 12.

In this chapter of "The Last One at the Wedding," the characters are gathered at a wedding celebration, where conversations and interactions reveal their various personalities and dynamics. Hugo, a charming staff member, quickly engages with Gerry, indicating a behind-the-scenes professionalism. Tammy expresses her fascination with Hugo's allure, while Gerry provides context about Hugo's background, highlighting the mix of cultures present at the event.

Conversations shift among the guests, with Tammy and Sierra discussing the couple's relationship amid a jazz backdrop. The discontented and skeptical eyes of Frankie, a key character, observe Tammy's acceptance of the pairing, causing tension regarding age gaps. This discomfort is contrasted with Abigail's whimsical behavior, indicating a carefree atmosphere among certain attendees.

As the night unfolds, Frank struggles with unease from various unsettling incidents—the privacy document, an unsettling conversation with Brody Taggart, and an encounter with Gwendolyn. His concerns deepen with the absence of Maggie's fiancé, Aidan, raising suspicions. Tammy attempts to dispel Frank's paranoia, but hints at past relationships that add to Frank's anxiety.

Frank's awkward foray into mingling with Aidan's friends further emphasizes his generational disconnect, reinforced by youthful banter and trends that feel foreign to him. Khalani's invitation to partake in THC gummy bears signals a carefree attitude among the younger crowd, which Frank finds disconcerting. A glimpse of Catherine Gardner, Aidan's mother, from an upper window adds a layer of intrigue, with the chapter hinting at her elusive nature.

Eventually, Frank's pursuit to meet Catherine leads him to Gwendolyn, who cryptically warns him of hidden dangers within the wedding's facade, urging him to persuade Maggie to reconsider the marriage. Gwendolyn's warnings heighten the suspense, making Frank realize that something ominous lurks beneath the celebratory surface, setting the stage for a thriller as the story progresses. The chapter culminates in a tension-filled interaction with Gwendolyn and her ominous advice, leaving Frank—and the reader—on edge about the unfolding mystery.

Chapter 4.

Maggie suggested we arrive at twelve-thirty for lunch, but we didn't hit New Hampshire until eleven, so I needed to hurry. Driving through the picturesque lakes region down Interstate 93 on a two-lane highway, we passed towns characterized by gas stations, sports bars, and roadside produce stands. Many residents had firewood for sale on the honor system—a part of small-town life. The GPS indicated we were still forty-five minutes from Osprey Cove, and while I was eager to stretch my legs, I couldn't ignore the knot of nervousness in my stomach about meeting Errol and Catherine and their vast network of friends.

Tammy noticed my anxiety, noting my nail-biting habit. I shared my unease stemming from a news report about a woman who had lost everything in a fire, feeling as though it was an omen for my day ahead. Tammy reassured me that pre-wedding jitters were normal, as she too felt out of her element, never having attended a summer camp before. I dreaded saying or doing something to embarrass Maggie, especially since I didn't want to ruin her special weekend or our chance for reconciliation.

Our journey continued as we crested a hill, revealing the White Mountains and a vibrant blue lake teeming with sailboats. We entered Hopps Ferry, a village with a faded charm, where Tammy urgently requested to stop for a bathroom break. Finally, we reached a roadside restaurant named Mom and Dad's. While Tammy and Abigail rushed inside, I felt too anxious to engage with strangers, diverting my focus to a bulletin board covered in local flyers.

One flyer caught my eye: it was about a missing woman named Dawn Taggart, who had vanished since November 3rd. Brody Taggart, claiming to be her uncle, approached me as I examined the flyer. He recounted how his niece went missing after seeking help from Aidan Gardner, raising alarm bells about the Gardner family. As Brody passionately warned me about the Gardners' alleged dark history, the situation escalated with a police officer intervening.

After the commotion settled, the restaurant owner dismissed Brody's claims, suggesting he was the town's resident troublemaker. The man spoke highly of the Gardners' contributions to the town, which left me and Tammy in disbelief but somewhat relieved. As the bizarre encounter lingered in our minds, Tammy reassured Abigail, dismissing Brody's chaotic outburst. It became evident that everyone held their own narratives about the Gardners, making our family gathering at Osprey Cove increasingly complicated.

Chapter 8.

In the chapter of "The Last One at the Wedding," the protagonist reflects on the uncomfortable atmosphere following their arrival at a wedding camp. The new bedroom lacks adequate seating, and while unpacking is underway, the protagonist feels increasingly isolated. Anticipation builds for a chance to meet future in-laws, Errol and Catherine, but their absence heightens a sense of unwelcomeness, compounded by the rapid departures of family members, including Aidan rushing off with a friend and Maggie heading into town without inviting the protagonist.

Around three o'clock, as the protagonist waits for their daughter, Abigail, they engage in a brief conversation about games. Despite Abigail's desire to join, the protagonist encourages her to stay behind, aiming for some quality time with Maggie. Just then, Maggie calls, reporting a myriad of wedding-related disasters, such as the florist's mistakes and a COVID-positive videographer, revealing her escalating stress. The protagonist struggles with the idea of exploring the camp alone, having anticipated family bonding instead of solitary activities like horseshoes.

After the call, the protagonist feels somewhat embarrassed lying to Abigail about where Maggie is. They venture outdoors, passing empty chairs and a seemingly deserted beach, while caterers set up for an elaborate dinner. Surprised by the scale of the preparations, the protagonist learns from a carpenter that the team is getting ready for that evening rather than the actual wedding on Saturday. When Aidan appears with a woman named Gwendolyn, the protagonist attempts to catch up, but they vanish into the woods.

Compelled to follow them, the protagonist soon overhears a tense conversation between Aidan and Gwendolyn. She expresses frustration, insisting on honesty, while Aidan pressures her to avoid Margaret. This cryptic interaction raises the protagonist's concerns. Upon discovering Gwendolyn's hostile reaction toward their identity as Margaret's father, the protagonist's unease deepens. Aidan explains Gwendolyn's background and her critical nature of the camp, but the atmosphere hangs heavy with unspoken tensions. As the chapter unfolds, themes of family dynamics, the stress of weddings, and the looming uncertainties of relationships come to the forefront, leaving the protagonist grappling with their observations and the implications of what they have overheard.

Chapter 4.

****The Last One at the Wedding - Chapter Summary****

The narrator reflects on the tragic death of his wife, Colleen, who succumbed to a brain aneurysm while working at Michaels, leaving behind their ten-year-old daughter, Maggie. This event profoundly affected their lives, particularly as Maggie faced the turmoil of early adolescence without her mother. The narrator grapples with feelings of guilt, often wishing he had taken Colleen's place, believing she would have raised Maggie well while he supported them from his Teamsters pension. The narrator acknowledges his shortcomings as a father, especially given his strained relationship with Maggie, who had stopped speaking to him for three years.

Following this somber backdrop, he narrates Maggie's surprise announcement of her engagement to Aidan. However, he is apprehensive about the sudden news, particularly after realizing she and Aidan are already cohabiting. The narrator is not shocked by this revelation, understanding the economic pressures of living in Boston, where housing is costly. Maggie's previous apartment was a miserable space infested with silverfish, which she detested. Consequently, her decision to move in with Aidan was likely a relief.

Despite his concerns about the state of their new living arrangement, the narrator insists on celebrating the engagement at a restaurant rather than at their apartment. He offers to pay for the meal, wanting to make the occasion special, but Maggie deflects this, insisting that they gather at her place instead. This raises alarm bells for the narrator, who questions the safety of the area they live in, especially given alarming news reports about local crime.

While he tries to conceal his worry, he's still hesitant and wants to ensure his daughter is safe in her new environment. His concern underscores his protective nature as a father, yet he ultimately seeks to support Maggie's choices, requesting her to text him their address as he prepares to meet her and Aidan. The chapter conveys a mix of grief, apprehension, and a desire to reconnect with his daughter amid the complexities of their evolving family dynamics.

II. The Arrival

Please upload the chapter you'd like me to summarize, and I'll get started on it for you.

Chapter 5.

Frank, Tammy, and Abigail left their mundane lives behind as they embarked on a journey through dense woods towards Osprey Cove, ostensibly for Margaret's wedding. As they maneuvered a rough, nameless road, doubts emerged about their destination, but Tammy reassured Frank with her insight into the secretive nature of the wealthy. After numerous disheartening minutes, they stumbled upon a gravel driveway marked only by a bouquet of gold balloons, guiding them deeper into the woods.

The property manager, Hugo, greeted them warmly at the admission gate, recognizing Frank immediately. His enthusiastic but quirky welcoming included some peculiar instructions about "Gardner Standard Time," which amusingly required them to set their watches forward by fifteen minutes. Frank remained skeptical but reluctantly complied as Abigail insisted she wanted to fit in. The promise of a lavish weekend lay ahead, yet Frank's discomfort swelled as they were made to sign a dense privacy document, which included legal jargon that left him feeling uneasy.

Past the toll booth, a picturesque scene unfolded—Osprey Lodge, an architectural marvel, awaited them at the end of a driveway. Maggie, excited to see her family, welcomed them at the entrance, and within

moments of reunion, Abigail was enlisted to replace a strep-throat stricken flower girl, which delighted the little girl. Meanwhile, the tension surrounding Frank regarding "not compromising" simmered beneath the surface as Aidan navigated the awkwardness of blended family dynamics.

As they settled into their luxurious accommodation—a lavish cottage named Blackbird—Aidan's sudden departure to attend to a friend cast a shadow over the family time they had anticipated. Maggie's wedding preparations kept her occupied, leaving Frank feeling like a visitor rather than a participant in the family event. Despite the bountiful lunch laid before them, the underlying tensions about wedding arrangements and the privacy contract loomed large while Frank grappled with feelings of isolation and yearning to participate in his daughter's special weekend.

With the joyful chaos of wedding anticipation surrounding them, the joy of the setting contrasted sharply with the family's worries, realities, and the yearning for deeper connections amidst the celebration. The chapter closed with Frank full of hope and apprehension about the weekend ahead.

Chapter 8.

In the secluded Globe, an old outdoor theater nestled among trees, a wedding rehearsal was underway, surrounded by an unwelcome crowd of guests. The atmosphere, meant to feel sacred, was disrupted by dozens sipping wine and nibbling on snacks. I was disappointed that the couple's moment remained a public spectacle.

RJ, a young man with curly hair, introduced himself as the ceremony's host, despite being a human resources worker rather than a pastor. He had obtained his officiant credentials online primarily for this event. Eager to meet the groom, Aidan, RJ sought him out. Aidan, sitting with groomsmen, appeared pale and unwell, his face marked with a rash.

As Errol Gardner arrived, he expressed regret for his wife's absence due to illness but remained optimistic about her participation in the wedding. Meanwhile, Tammy and Abigail practiced flower girl duties, but Abigail was overly energetic, often trailing behind her cousin, proudly presenting herself as "the cousin of the bride," much to my annoyance.

Tammy pointed out Abigail's background from a broken home and how this wedding was a significant event for her, contrasting my jaded perspective. I pointed out Aidan's apparent distress, but Tammy insisted it was nerves, recalling my own anxiousness before my wedding.

The rehearsal eventually began, led by RJ, who directed the procession, during which Abigail scattered flower petals down the aisle, followed by the bridesmaids and groomsmen. When it was my turn to escort my daughter Maggie, conflict arose over our previous discussions about trust and the incident that had caused tension between us. Despite this, I tried to stay composed, recognizing my worries about Aidan's emotional state could stem from various rational causes.

As the rehearsal progressed, RJ revealed his "Bible" was just a prop, and he assuaged Maggie and Aidan's worries about the ceremony's tone. Most participants were nervous, except for Tammy, who confidently rehearsed her reading from the Bible. Her heartfelt recitation filled the air with a reverent silence, prompting RJ to question if they should consider a more contemporary approach, but Maggie assured him it was perfect, stabilizing the emotional atmosphere of the rehearsal.

Chapter 8.

In the chapter titled "The Last One at the Wedding," we follow Frank as he experiences a pivotal evening at his niece Abigail's debut performance in her elementary school's musical, *Beauty and the Beast*. Despite her small role as a spoon, Abigail had been intensely focused during weeks of rehearsals, while Frank, acting as her caretaker and guardian, felt the pressure to ensure the night went perfectly. Set against the backdrop of a challenging family dynamic involving Abigail's birth mother, Frank reflects on their current situation and the commitment he and his sister, Tammy, made to adopt Abigail to provide her stability and support.

On opening night, Frank finds himself backstage, where he anxiously awaits the show's success. He has invested deeply in this moment, memorizing all the songs and actively helping with set changes. The performance turns out to be a resounding success, culminating with a standing ovation for the cast and crew, although Frank misses the curtain call due to his responsibilities. After the show, the celebration in the school parking lot buzzes with excitement as children enjoy homemade treats under the warm spring sky. Frank shares a humorous moment with Abigail while waiting for ice cream and shows his affectionate nature by offering her his ice cream cone after she accidentally drops hers.

As the evening draws to a close, Frank interacts with Abigail's school principal, who mistakenly identifies him as Abigail's father. The misunderstanding highlights Frank's unique position as her uncle rather than a traditional father figure, stemming from Tammy's adoption of Abigail. The principal later shows Frank an essay Abigail wrote about him, titled "#1 Dad Frank Szatowski," which highlights his role in her life, not just as an uncle but as a significant father figure. The moment is emotional for Frank, who is clearly touched by Abigail's sentiments and the recognition from her school.

In the end, Frank appreciates Abigail's achievements and reflects on the importance of their family bond while contemplating future conversations about their unusual family structure. The principal's concern about potential confusion for Abigail is addressed, and they establish a plan for Frank to communicate openly with her, indicating a hopeful future for the vibrant family they are building together.

Chapter 2.

In this chapter of "The Last One at the Wedding," the protagonist reflects on his recent loss while managing his responsibilities as a UPS driver. An hour after receiving condolences from his supervisor, he chooses to return to work, believing it might help him cope with his daughter Maggie's grief. Unbeknownst to him, a severe heat wave is gripping the region, prompting local mayors to issue warnings for residents to stay indoors and take care of one another. His usual preparation for deliveries is overlooked; instead of packing cooling snacks, he grabs a standard lunch.

Upon arriving at the package facility, he quickly realizes the intensity of the heat when the managers distribute sun hats and extra water bottles. Working without air conditioning, the drivers are warned to take frequent breaks. The narrator's day takes a challenging turn as he discovers he has an unusually heavy load, including many dog food deliveries and air conditioners purchased by customers to combat the heat. As he struggles through the sweltering conditions, sweat pours down his face, and symptoms of heat exhaustion begin to manifest. He takes a brief respite at McDonald's, hoping to recover before continuing his route, which still has 139 parcels left to deliver.

Amidst his physical struggles, his mind is preoccupied with thoughts about Maggie's well-being and the uncertain future without Aidan. The weight of his worries distracts him enough that he misses a turn, adding time to his already strenuous workday. As the journey continues, he begins experiencing severe cramping and disorientation while driving through a familiar but distorted landscape that feels foreign to him.

Suddenly, he spots a parked car on the roadside, with two familiar figures, Dawn Taggart and Aidan Gardner, changing a tire. Despite recognizing them, his attention falters, leading to a dangerous situation. As he drifts

off the road and into a ravine, panic ensues. In a split second, the world around him spirals in chaos, and as his truck begins to flip, he braces himself for the inevitable impact, amidst the falling packages that create havoc inside the vehicle.

Chapter 4.

In the chapter from "The Last One at the Wedding," the protagonist returns to his bedroom to find it clean and organized, suggesting a housekeeper had tidied up after a chaotic previous night. His suitcase is unpacked, the bathroom is free of vomit, and even the cedar closet is clear of daddy longlegs. As he prepares for the wedding, he carefully unpacks his hand-tailored, pearl-gray tuxedo from Italy. The pristine white shirt is complemented by black onyx studs, and he feels pride in being able to tie a real bow tie, despite the accessory package containing a clip-on version.

Amidst dressing, his phone buzzes with a call from Vicky, who expresses concern for his wellbeing. Their conversation reveals tension; he recounts a troubling incident involving a girl and drugs found in her cottage, which he struggles to discuss. He describes her as a "very troubled person," but also lies about the situation concerning another individual, Dawn Taggart, claiming it was merely a misunderstanding. He attributes his misinterpretations to being unaccustomed to the people in town, insisting everything has been resolved.

Despite his reassurances, Vicky's son Todd has been worried about him, indicating that something deeper may be amiss. Frank believes he has visibly upset her, but he maintains the façade of normalcy, hastening to inform her that the wedding ceremony is imminent. Vicky's lingering doubts manifest in her insistence on his well-being, prompting Frank to assure her one last time that he'll call her once home.

Ultimately, he reflects on the toast he must deliver at the wedding, extracting a single sheet of yellow lined paper with his speech draft. Despite his preparation, he is struck by the realization that his words feel insincere. He acknowledges that he hasn't truly believed his own speech, revealing an inner conflict as he prepares to speak about the bride and her late mother, culminating in the understanding of his struggle with authenticity in that moment.

Chapter 13.

In this chapter of "The Last One at the Wedding," the party atmosphere has shifted from a lively jazz trio to a raucous electronic dance scene, with the pounding music overwhelming conversation. The protagonist, Frank, finds himself alone at his dinner table, where Tammy and Abigail have left him surrounded by unfamiliar faces engaged in boisterous revelry. He scans the lawn, searching for Maggie amongst the chaos, witnessing more curious behaviors, like two men making out on a collapsing chair and women throwing horseshoes into the darkness.

Tammy finally appears, carrying a drowsy Abigail, who expresses her remorse for dropping food earlier. Tammy mentions that Maggie had come looking for Frank, but left after waiting too long. Concerned about Abigail's discomfort and the questionable environment, she opts to take her away. Frank reflects on his sister's situation, knowing that her parenting responsibilities were being compromised by the chaotic party.

Afterward, Frank walks down to a bonfire on the beach, worried about safety as young people frolic in and around the fire, and he notices nudity and partying, which intensifies his protective instincts for Maggie. When he finds her among the revelers, she playfully encourages him to join the swimming party, joking about the microdosing of drugs that some are trying. Frank is grateful to discover that Aidan is not part of this scene, prompting concern about Aidan's whereabouts at this crucial family gathering.

Their conversation highlights Frank's apprehension about the party's nature and the people involved. He attempts to focus on a promise of a morning canoe trip with Maggie, symbolizing his desire to rebuild their bond after her mother's death fifteen years prior. However, conversations with Errol and Gerry reveal societal expectations regarding relationships and parenting, adding to his internal conflict regarding family dynamics.

The chapter ends on a tense note as Frank questions Aidan's absence, peering into the lodge and sensing a figure watching him from a window, which leaves him feeling even more uneasy. Despite his exhaustion, there's a lingering concern as he questions the family values and the well-being of those around him. The narrative captures the complexity of parenting amid festive chaos and the emotional undercurrents of familial relationships, setting the stage for deeper exploration of these themes.

Chapter 3.

In the morning light, Frank descends to the living room, where his daughter Abigail is being fitted for her flower girl dress by Tammy and Maggie. The sight of Abigail, adorned with a crown of daisies and a sparkly dress, leaves Frank momentarily speechless. Despite his affection, Maggie shifts the focus to Frank's well-being, after an apparent distressing event the night before.

Maggie and Frank step outside for a long overdue conversation, where she promises to be honest if he listens without judgment. Frank's anxiety arises when the subject of her relationship with Errol Gardner, a married man nearly twice her age, comes up. Maggie insists her involvement with Errol, lasting almost a year, is consensual. She recounts how a professional mentorship evolved into a hidden romance, marked by lavish trips and secret meetings far from their workplace.

However, the mood turns somber when Maggie mentions a harrowing incident that occurred during a weekend trip to Osprey Cove, where they discovered a woman dead at the lodge. With the weight of the cover-up disclosed, Maggie describes how they managed to conceal the body and create false narratives involving Errol's wife, Catherine, and her son, Aidan. Frank, horrified, confronts Maggie about her involvement in this deception, questioning her motives and the ramifications of her actions.

As Frank grapples with his disapproval of Maggie's approaching marriage to Aidan, she remains resolute and dismissive of his concerns, asserting her plan for financial independence. He pleads with her to abandon the wedding and the path she's chosen, fearing the potential consequences if things go awry. Despite Frank's emotional outcry, Maggie remains defiant about her choices, leading to a confrontation about love, respect, and familial obligations.

Ultimately, Maggie insists that Frank participate in the wedding as her supportive father, leaving him in a conflicted position where he must consider his own values against the demands of his daughter. In a moment of emotional reckoning, Frank feels pressured into compliance, reflecting the complexity of their relationship and the perilous situation they find themselves in.

Chapter 10.

That night, around eight o'clock, I arrived home and retrieved my mail, which was mostly junk, except for a white envelope lacking a return address. My name appeared to be typed with an old manual typewriter and was postmarked from Hopps Ferry, New Hampshire. Inside was a photo of Aidan, my future son-in-law, looking fifteen pounds heavier and smiling alongside an unknown young woman dressed casually, with her arm draped around his waist. The image bore a handwritten message: "WHERE IS DAWN TAGGART???", which sparked immediate concerns in me.

Initially, I had a few doubts about Aidan, like the story behind his black eye. However, I trusted my daughter's judgment of him as a smart and responsible woman. The photo unsettled me, mainly because it raised questions about Aidan's connection with Dawn Taggart, who I suspected was the girl in the picture. Confused, I called my daughter Maggie, who surprisingly answered. She appeared preoccupied, given the wedding was in three days, but this tone shifted when I explained the photo and message.

After a long pause, Maggie divulged that last year, Aidan had dated a young woman named Dawn Taggart, who went missing after a hike. Dawn was from Hopps Ferry, and despite Aidan being cleared by the police—proven to be in Boston at the time—her mother had blamed him. Maggie instructed me to preserve the envelope and photo as evidence, as it was likely sent by Dawn's mother seeking to harass Aidan's family for monetary compensation.

Further discussions raised doubts about Dawn's fate; a private investigator suggested she might have intentionally disappeared to escape her troubled relationship with her mother. I felt uneasy about the situation, recalling my own romantic experiences and realizing that Maggie might be overlooking Aidan's flaws. After the call, I researched Dawn's disappearance, finding a local news article that confirmed Maggie's story but noted the lack of Aidan's involvement.

Reluctantly, I sealed the photo and envelope in a Ziploc bag for the upcoming trip to New Hampshire, suppressing my worries to focus on the wedding celebrations ahead. My excitement for the festivities and my daughter's future overshadowed my increasing sense that something was amiss.

Chapter 1.

The next afternoon, I found myself at the Men's Wearhouse in Stroudsburg to return the tuxedo I wore to a wedding. The same kid with pink hair and piercings welcomed me, asking how everything went. I mumbled a polite response, still grappling with my thoughts from the previous night. After driving back from New Hampshire with Tammy and Abigail, I felt exhausted but couldn't sleep, anxiously waiting for updates from Maggie regarding the shocking incident that had unfolded. Even though she had reassured me, I couldn't shake off the worry. After a restless night, I checked my phone in the morning, only to find no messages.

In an attempt to distract myself, I started with some chores. I stripped the sheets from Maggie's childhood bedroom and tossed them in the washing machine—she had said she was never coming back, but I clung to the hope she might change her mind. After returning the tuxedo, I filled a grocery cart at ShopRite with her favorite foods, all while frequently checking my phone for any missed calls. It was late in the afternoon when I finally received a call. It was Vicky from Supercuts, and my stomach dropped as I answered, knowing this conversation was unavoidable.

Vicky expressed her condolences about what happened, having seen it all over the news and on social media. A wealthy tech tycoon's son dying in a firearms accident right before his wedding was bound to attract attention. When she asked about Maggie, I hesitated, unsure how to respond. I didn't want to lie, but I also couldn't reveal the truth. I described Maggie as very confused. Vicky offered to meet up for dinner to talk about everything, and, despite my desire for the emotional support, I felt the need to maintain my distance. I pointed out that she wasn't a professional therapist, which stung her.

Despite her insistence that she wasn't "just" a haircutter and her previous willingness to attend the wedding, I felt overwhelmed and abruptly ended the call. I took down her business cards from my refrigerator, ready to discard them to avoid falling back into the conversation. I told myself I could wait a month before needing another haircut, letting the distance build between us.

Chapter 6.

At seven o'clock, Lucia served an elaborate meal, presenting various courses that highlighted vegetables, as Maggie and Aidan were on a vegan diet. The meal featured unique flavors from mushrooms, eggplants, and roasted squash, which surprisingly filled me up after several courses. I complimented Lucia on her cooking abilities, expressing that I could easily become a vegan if she cooked for me regularly. Maggie dominated the conversation, showcasing her impressive engagement ring, a pear-cut diamond that was a family heirloom from Aidan's grandmother. She enthusiastically described their wedding plans, emphasizing a rustic and country-style reception. Throughout this, Aidan remained mostly silent, a demeanor I noted as he seemed content to let Maggie take the lead.

When I inquired about their honeymoon plans, Aidan mentioned they were undecided. I shared fond memories of my own honeymoon cruise, but realized I had lost Maggie's attention as she checked her Apple Watch, which kept pinging. She abruptly excused herself to take a call for work, a moment that showcased her commitment to her job. Though I tried to engage Aidan further about his life, his answers remained brief, leading to an awkward silence between us.

Upon Maggie's return, I sensed unease when I urged her to share some "good news," but she hesitated. It soon became clear that her big announcement involved a significant promotion related to a new division at her company, Capaciti, which aimed to advance all-electric air travel. The prospect of working with high-profile figures like Armando Castado from UPS amazed me. Maggie shared that the discussions were promising, indicating a bright future ahead. Overcome with emotion, I hugged her while processing this life-changing news at the table.

As the evening ended, Maggie offered to box leftovers while I headed to the bathroom. There, I encountered an oversized setup filled with luxurious beauty products. After washing my hands, I noticed a running toilet, prompting me to investigate. I quickly identified and fixed the issue, only to discover a black plastic bag taped beneath the toilet lid, which piqued my curiosity just as Maggie came knocking, inquiring about my well-being.

Chapter 6.

In this chapter of "The Last One at the Wedding," Frank Szatowski returns to Blackbird cottage to find his sister Tammy and niece Abigail gearing up for a hike amid the chaotic aftermath of a recent tragedy involving Gwendolyn, a girl who was discovered dead. While Tammy insists that they must move forward and participate in the event, Frank feels overwhelmed and opts to stay behind for some much-needed rest. Watching them leave, he prepares a quick snack, hoping to avoid further encounters with the hiking group.

Frank decides to take a quieter route back to the beach, where he discovers Gwendolyn's body had been dragged ashore. The atmosphere is tense, the previous chaos subsided, leaving only vague reminders of the tragedy. Reaching the entrance of the camp, he encounters Hugo, who is cheerful and offers help in getting Frank's car. Despite Frank's insistence that he can manage, Hugo promises to arrange for the Jeep's delivery, maintaining a bright demeanor about the situation.

As they chat, Hugo divulges that he runs the camp year-round, dealing with various maintenance issues. The two briefly discuss Aidan Gardner's reluctance to visit the camp, with Hugo hinting that Aidan is consumed with work in Boston. Soon after, Frank is reunited with his vehicle and heads into town.

Arriving at a restaurant, Frank maneuvers through the area, eventually leading to a wooded path where he seeks out Brody Taggart, hoping for answers about Gwendolyn's death. As he approaches Brody's home, he hears a dog barking. To his surprise, Brody emerges with an AR-15, threatening Frank from the porch. Frank tries to convey the urgency of his visit, revealing Gwendolyn's tragic demise. After a tense moment, Brody's sister Linda joins them, revealing a more hospitable side.

Linda and Frank begin to discuss Dawn, her daughter, as they delve into the nature of her relationship with Aidan Gardner. Linda reveals her concerns about "Gardner Standard Time," manipulated realities created by Aidan and his family. She explains Dawn's unsteady relationship history with Aidan, which is more complicated than it appears.

As the conversation unfolds, Linda shares alarming details about Dawn's last days, including a pregnancy test she discovered and a concerning phone call from her daughter before her disappearance. The chapter concludes with a sense of dread and suspicion, as Linda expresses outright disbelief in the police's handling of the investigation and hints that they might have covered up crucial evidence surrounding her daughter's fate. The tension escalates, leaving Frank intimately aware of the dangers surrounding his own daughter, Maggie, as the pieces of an unsettling mystery begin to reveal themselves.

Chapter 9.

In this chapter from "The Last One at the Wedding," the protagonist describes his visit to FCI Corbettsville, a minimum-security correctional facility in New York designed for nonviolent offenders. With a structure resembling college dorms, it offers inmates various jobs as well as classes in diverse subjects. On the protagonist's birthday, he arrives early to ensure he can visit his daughter, having researched online the best practices for visiting.

Upon entering, he encounters strict security protocols. He experiences a mixture of professionalism and impersonal bureaucracy, facing challenges when his name is not on the visitation list. These lists are crucial as inmates must approve visitors beforehand. Despite his efforts, the officer informs him that only Margaret can add him to her list, emphasizing that he must return during designated hours after getting her consent. Frustrated but understanding, he tries to persuade the officer to make an exception, but to no avail.

He then reflects on the various emotional ties and dynamics unfolding around him as visitors reunite with inmates. The atmosphere in the visitation room includes hopeful interactions, tears, and the solemn reality of incarceration. After some waiting, the officer finds Margaret but relays the disappointing news that she has chosen not to see him. The protagonist learns of other parents in similar situations but feels the weight of isolation as he moves forward.

As he prepares to leave, he acknowledges the contrast between his life outside and the palpable longing of those inside the prison, marked by a mix of hope and despair. He expresses gratitude for the love and support from friends and family waiting for him, all while grappling with the absence of his daughter at his birthday gathering. This chapter poignantly captures the struggles of maintaining familial bonds amidst the harsh realities of the prison system, creating a powerful emotional resonance for the reader.

Chapter 9.

The night before my trip to New Hampshire, I visited Supercuts for a trim with Vicky. We've developed a close rapport during my frequent visits; she always meticulously cuts my short hair while engaging in delightful conversations. Though we are of similar age, Vicky appears youthful with her long dark hair and bright smile. A devoted reader of historical romances, she often shares insights about the Tudors and Vikings, consistently showcasing a new book during each appointment.

Vicky, who has been married and divorced twice, proudly displays photos of her two children on her workstation mirror. Her son, Todd, resides in Brooklyn and works for the Wall Street Journal, while her beloved daughter, Janet, tragically passed two years ago from a drug overdose. Janet's presence still graces Vicky's mirror through cherished memories of family milestones, underscoring her lasting impact on Vicky's

life.

In recent weeks, I had confided in Vicky about my complicated relationship with Maggie, our unexpected reconciliation, and the upcoming wedding. Her attentive listening and thoughtful inquiries have made me contemplate inviting her to the wedding, although I dismissed the idea since we've never socialized outside the salon.

That night, Vicky dedicated extra time to my haircut in preparation for my trip, offering a hot towel treatment that felt heavenly. She insisted on treating me by waiving the cost, framing it as a wedding gift. As I left, I noticed two teenage girls skateboarding outside a Chipotle and felt a creative impulse to invite Vicky.

Returning to the salon, I found Vicky with a young boy in her chair. Surprised by my presence, I proposed the idea of her joining me in New Hampshire. Despite her flattered response, she explained that she had prior commitments and could not leave her colleagues behind during the busy weekend. Vicky offered to catch up after my trip for lunch, encouraging me to share wedding stories and photos, pressing her business card into my hand as a reminder.

Though I had several cards already, her gesture felt reassuring, and I promised to call her.

Chapter 2.

In the chapter from "The Last One at the Wedding," the protagonist experiences a surge of anticipation as they finally have a way to reach their daughter, Maggie. Despite the excitement, repeated attempts to call her yield busy signals, indicating that she is trying to call back. Anxiously waiting in Maggie's childhood bedroom, the protagonist is surrounded by remnants of the past—old posters, trophies, and a sense of nostalgia for the moments shared as a family.

When Maggie finally calls, her familiar voice brings a wave of emotions. The protagonist expresses concern for her well-being, but she reassures him that everything is fine and mentions she is in her apartment in Boston. An awkward silence follows as both struggle to navigate their conversation. Having long rehearsed this moment, the protagonist feels the weight of the situation and asks if she received the many cards he sent her. Maggie affirms this but quickly diverts the conversation, expressing a reluctance to discuss their family issues.

Seeking more positive ground, the protagonist shifts to Maggie's job, expressing pride in her three-year anniversary at Capaciti, a once small start-up that has now turned into a tech giant. However, the mood shifts abruptly when Maggie announces that she is getting married. She shares details about her fiancé, Aidan, and the upcoming wedding planned by his family in New Hampshire. The information hits the protagonist like a surprise revelation, overwhelming him as he processes the news of her engagement.

Amid the excitement, Maggie expresses a desire for her father to be present at the wedding despite past difficulties in their relationship. This moment marks a turning point in their communication, revealing both the distance and the connection that still exist between them as she navigates new beginnings in her life.

Chapter 7.

In this chapter, the protagonist reflects on the aftermath of a tragic event that occurred during what was supposed to be a joyous wedding. He recounts how two police officers took his statement, their disinterest apparent as they rushed through the process and showed more interest in aligning his account with others than in his feelings. Leaving the once-bustling scene of the reception, he returns to an empty cottage, a stark

contrast to the lively celebrations that had filled the area just hours before.

Upon changing out of his tuxedo and into more comfortable clothes for the long drive ahead, he discovers a manila envelope containing ten one-hundred-dollar bills. This mysterious gift from Aidan surprises him; he doubts its effectiveness as a form of protection, feeling angered and confused about its purpose, especially given that all of the bills are old, hinting at a secretive origin.

As he makes his way to Osprey Lodge, he encounters police officers taking leftover food home, their embarrassment evident in their demeanor. In the living room, he finds Tammy and Maggie, who abruptly stop their conversation upon his arrival. The once-promising wedding is now overshadowed by death and loss; the protagonist tries to convince Maggie to leave, emphasizing the stark reality that without the marriage, she has no claim to anything, not even the prenup. This truth seems hard for her to accept.

After an emotionally charged exchange, Maggie insists on staying longer to discuss matters with Errol, prompting concern in the protagonist that Maggie's ties to the Gardner family might keep her trapped. Despite his emotional exhaustion, he must ensure the safety of his daughter, Abigail. He learns Abigail has gone missing and searches desperately for her.

Eventually, he finds her alone in the Globe, where the final remnants of the wedding linger. Abigail, adorned with a daisy crown, is deeply affected by the events, embodying the grief of loss and disappointment in her childlike way. They sit together, sharing in their sadness, and despite his own struggles, he comforts her, affirming that leaving will help them heal.

As the sun sets, he encourages her to leave with him, promising that each subsequent day will feel a bit less painful. Abigail's reluctance to leave is overcome as he carries her, fostering a bond of reassurance while they walk back to camp, navigating their shared loss amidst the fading echoes of the wedding.

Chapter 4.

The summer came to an end, and although Tammy insisted my childcare duties were no longer necessary, I continued to assist her. I ensured Abigail attended her math club appointments, updated her vaccinations, and found a dentist to address her numerous cavities. The dentist referred us to an orthodontist who, astonished by Abigail's dental needs, declared, "She's going to need a lot of braces." It led to a week-long battle with Pennsylvania Medicaid, which preferred cheaper alternatives, while I insisted on quality, ultimately covering most costs myself.

By October, our daily routine had evolved seamlessly. One day, Tammy requested I pick up Abigail from school due to a work issue. I collected her in my Jeep and prepared tacos for dinner while she spread out her homework on the living room floor. After cleaning up, we watched a cooking show on Netflix, which featured humorous baking disasters, followed by sending her to bed after a half hour of reading her fantasy novel about Warrior Cats.

That evening, while saying goodnight, I spotted a map affixed above her dresser amid her room's playful decorations. It was a topographical map of Lake Wyndham near Osprey Cove, adorned with features sketched in pencil and marked with a bright red "X" at its deepest point. Curious, I inquired about its origin, and Abigail revealed it was a gift from Aidan, who had given it to her after their New Hampshire trip.

She suggested it was a treasure map, and her enthusiasm was unmistakable. "One day, I'm going back to Osprey Cove to look for the X. You should come." When I asked if she had shown it to Tammy, she replied no, citing Tammy's warning about discussing Osprey Cove due to potential repercussions.

Concerned, I carefully explained my belief that Abigail had mistakenly received the map, emphasizing Aidan's intention might have been to give her money instead. My suggestion about the \$1,000 hidden in my

suitcase puzzled her, leading to an animated conversation about exchanging the map for cash. We agreed on a deal, resulting in her ecstasy over receiving eighty-four dollars, while I wrestled with my overwhelming emotions about the map in my hands.

Chapter 10.

In this chapter of "The Last One at the Wedding," we are introduced to a lively scene centered around Frank and his interactions with his sister, Tammy, and her daughter, Abigail. The chapter opens with Abigail, exuberantly dressed in a furry blue bodysuit and expressing her excitement over being 'Stitch' from the animated film "Lilo and Stitch." Despite her playful nature, Frank tries to guide her during the buffet dinner, emphasizing moderation and good manners as many adults are observing them.

Tammy, enjoying her piña colada, engages in conversations with other guests while Abigail eagerly fills her plate with food, ignoring Frank's advice about portion control. As Abigail struggles with her choices at the buffet, her clumsiness leads to a mishap where a piece of chicken piccata falls to the ground. Frank's frustration escalates when Abigail refuses to pick it up, showcasing a blend of childlike innocence and stubbornness. Eventually, he picks it up himself to prevent wastage and discreetly transitions to another table.

Upon arrival at their table, they meet Gerry Levinson and his wife, Sierra. Gerry introduces his young, glamorous wife while boasting about her ambitions as a children's book author. The juxtaposition of their relationship raises eyebrows for Frank, highlighting a significant age difference. As dinner unfolds, Frank feels out of place amidst the chatter about Gerry's legal work and Sierra's budding writing career, which he consumes reluctantly, mindful of the wasted chicken.

While suave jazz plays and Maggie—the hostess—mingles with guests, Frank observes that Aidan and Gwendolyn are notably absent. At the table, Tammy challenges Abigail's impressive trivia skills, much to everyone's amazement; Abigail rattles off the longest rivers in Europe and Asia effortlessly, earning her accolades from the guests. This unexpected brilliance from Abigail brings Frank a moment of pride, marking a rare moment of gratitude for her presence at the gathering.

The chapter encapsulates themes of family, the inquisitive nature of children, and highlights the complex dynamics at social gatherings, particularly in light of varying adult behaviors and expectations .

Acknowledgments

In the acknowledgment section of "The Last One at the Wedding," the author expresses heartfelt gratitude to a multitude of individuals and organizations that contributed to the completion of the book. The author begins by giving thanks to those who helped organize the wedding, specifically mentioning Rick Chillot, Mike Russell, Doogie Horner, Grace Warrington, Jill Warrington, Steve Hockensmith, Ian Doescher, Kelly Chancey, Patrick Caulfield, Dave Murray, Grady Hendrix, and Michael Koryta. Their support played a critical role in the planning process.

Flowers are an integral part of any wedding, and the author credits Alweina Design and Will Staehle for the uniquely gruesome bouquets featured in the story, alongside appreciation for Will's work on the book's sinister cover design. The author narrates a personal moment of needing a quiet space to write, which was graciously provided by David Borgenicht, who offered access to his office building without any rent, showcasing the kindness that aided the author's writing process.

The author acknowledges Ian, the UPS driver, who took time to assist with questions, humorously hoping for forgiveness regarding any creative liberties taken with his character. Meanwhile, Zack Wagman, the editor, is

praised as a source of calm during overwhelming moments, with the author detailing Wagman's enthusiastic support and insightful editorial input.

Further thanks go to the team at Flatiron/Macmillan, specifically Cat Kenney, Marlena Bittner, and others for their invaluable behind-the-scenes support. The author also expresses appreciation for Doug Stewart, their literary agent, ensuring that their stories reached a broader audience, along with thanks to his dedicated assistants.

Lastly, the author raises a toast to their spouse, Julie Scott, their children, Sam and Anna, and extended family, recognizing their unwavering support throughout the writing journey while highlighting that, thankfully, they did not serve as inspiration for the book's content. This acknowledgment section brims with gratitude toward various individuals and teams, emphasizing the collaborative nature of the creative process.

Dedication

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Chapter 2.

At seven-thirty, I rose to the enticing aroma of a sumptuous breakfast spread laid out silently in our cottage's kitchen. On the island sat muffins, bagels, pastries, oatmeal, yogurt, and a plentiful coffee urn, which I gratefully poured myself a cup of before stepping out onto the porch. My sister, Tammy, sat bundled in a robe, enjoying the serene sunrise over the lake while sipping hot tea. Our morning banter was light, with Tammy excitedly recounting her delightful conversation with Errol Gardner, a wealthy acquaintance she found surprisingly down-to-earth. Expressing her admiration for him, she noted how he had offered to teach her foster daughter Abigail how to water-ski, showcasing his generosity amidst the high-profile party atmosphere.

As we chatted over breakfast, I relayed Errol's odd offer to find me a "companion," which Tammy playfully responded to, suggesting he must know some pleasant widows. I dismissed the idea, insisting I simply wanted quality time with my daughter, Maggie, and her family. As we enjoyed our meal, Abigail, in peculiar pajamas, shuffled outdoors, revealing her itchiness from what turned out to be a lice infestation. Tammy's unconventional remedy involving mayonnaise soon stank up our breakfast nook, leaving me appalled as she slathered it into Abigail's hair.

Realizing I was late for a canoe ride with Maggie, I declined Abigail's eager request to join, prioritizing my time with her mother instead. After a brief discussion, I reassured both Tammy and Abigail I would take her out later that day.

When I finally met Maggie, she surprised me with coffee before we launched our canoe. Paddling, she guided the boat toward Cormorant Point, a scenic spot where other campers would meet for lunch. During our outing, I couldn't help but worry about Maggie's fiancée, Aidan, and their dynamics, especially given my past with the family. Though Abigail had been left behind due to her lice problem, Maggie assured me of her mother Catherine's care back at the lodge.

Maggie insisted that adventure awaited us, brushing off my worries regarding Aidan. Yet, my concerns didn't fade easily, especially against the backdrop of a group of guests awaiting us upon our return, sensing something unusual stirring at Osprey Lodge. As we neared the shore, guards waded toward us, urging us to dock, and a startling discovery awaited—a figure floating in the water, an ominous sight breaking the tranquil atmosphere of our morning .

IV. The Wedding

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Chapter 1.

In the opening of “The Last One at the Wedding,” the protagonist receives a call from an UNKNOWN CALLER, typically associated with scams, yet he decides to answer. To his surprise, it is his daughter, Maggie. He quickly sits up, his excitement evident, as the initial shock causes him to spill coffee on his breakfast. However, Maggie's voice is faint and distorted, making communication difficult.

Recognizing the challenge of poor reception in his kitchen, he moves into the living room, where he mistakenly trips over some lumber from an unfinished carpentry project. As he maneuvers through the clutter, he heads to Maggie's childhood bedroom, knowing there is a better signal by the window overlooking their backyard and the Lackawanna rail lines.

Once he finds a spot with three bars, he attempts to reconnect with Maggie. Unfortunately, she still sounds distant, evoking images of her being far away or trapped, emphasizing his concern. Their conversation unfolds with escalating tension; he can hear her calling but struggles to understand her words. He asks if she is okay, desperate for her reassurance. Just as he believes they might establish a connection, the call abruptly drops, leaving him with nothing but the short message of call failure.

This moment encapsulates the estrangement between father and daughter, highlighted by their long silence of three years. It sets the tone for a narrative steeped in emotional distance and the longing for reconnection, underscoring both the challenges of communication and the palpable concern a father holds for his child. The chapter concludes with a sense of urgency and an unresolved tension, as Maggie's whereabouts and wellbeing remain a mystery.

Chapter 4.

In the unfolding drama surrounding Gwendolyn's death, Tammy quickly established her viewpoint. “I think we can all agree she looked like trouble,” she stated, expressing concern over Gwendolyn's apparent state. Last night at the buffet, Tammy had observed Gwendolyn's frail, glassy-eyed appearance and minimal food intake—just some green beans, corn, and rice. “This kid's an addict,” she concluded, attributing her condition to substance abuse.

Frankie, who had just reunited with Tammy and Abigail beneath Big Ben, the property's historic tree, disagreed. Despite Tammy's insistence that Gwendolyn's demeanor was a clear sign of addiction—stemming from her background with birth parents who were addicts—Frankie recalled a sober interaction with Gwendolyn from the previous night. As they discussed the implications of Gwendolyn's death on the upcoming wedding, Abigail was busy attempting a dangerous climb in the tree. Ignoring Frankie's warnings, she ascended further and eventually sought help when she became stuck.

Tammy and Frankie debated their options, with Tammy suggesting they call for a ladder. Frankie, however, believed he could manage the situation. The situation escalated quickly when Abigail fell, landing on Frankie and causing a painful back injury. As he lay on the ground cursing silently through the pain, Tammy rushed to check on Abigail, who had sustained only a small scratch.

As Tammy consoled Abigail and offered to treat the minor injury with cortisone, she finally turned her attention to Frankie, who was still on the ground. Although he insisted he was “fine,” he was deeply concerned about the potential impact of his injury on his job—an issue no one in their circle seemed to take seriously. Frankie feared that this injury might render him unemployable and was determined to get back up and find his daughter amid the chaos of the wedding preparations. Ultimately, he pushed through the pain, motivated by a sense of responsibility to both his daughter and himself.

I. The Invitation

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Chapter 7.

When I left the trailer, Brody noticed my limp and suggested I take the access road to the highway instead of climbing out of the gorge, which I appreciated. The longer route delayed my arrival at my parents' restaurant until nearly two o'clock. As I was backing out, my friend the bartender waved at me. I was relieved not to have to explain my presence there.

Upon arriving at Osprey Cove, I encountered a line of vehicles as guests arrived for the wedding. The security team was checking IDs, but fortunately, Hugo recognized me and urged me out of my Jeep, mentioning that Margaret had been looking for me. I felt guilty, realizing I hadn't brought anything, and Hugo seemed to sense my lie about what I found in town. Our conversation turned serious when I inquired about Gwendolyn—a girl associated with a recent death. Hugo shared that the police discovered xylazine, a dangerous animal tranquilizer, in her belongings, indicating something troubling happened.

Despite the festive atmosphere with guests reveling and celebrating, I couldn't forget the underlying tragedy. As I walked to the lodge, I ran into Minh from Babson College, Maggie's old roommate. Their friendship had me reminiscing about Maggie's college years and the difficulties she faced during a scandal. Minh was optimistic about Maggie's future, but I was filled with concern—an unsettling feeling that something was awry.

My sister Tammy shared their enjoyable afternoon activities, including waterskiing with Errol Gardner. She also revealed the surprising news that Errol gifted her a substantial amount of stock as a wedding present. Just as the excitement was building, I spotted Maggie emerging from the cottage with lemonade. I asked for a private conversation, stressing its importance.

When I shared that I had met Dawn's family, Maggie's reaction was immediate; she seemed taken aback. I noticed how emotions escalated as I expressed my belief in their version of events. I painted a picture of hidden dangers around her fiancé, Aidan, and the ongoing mysteries surrounding Gwendolyn's death. Despite my concerns, Maggie held her ground, insisting everything was fine, and I pushed back, suggesting she reconsider her situation.

In a moment of tension, Maggie remembered the photo she had, explaining how an intern noticed an anomaly in it—Aidan's thumb appeared on the wrong side, casting doubt on his innocence. The discovery added

weight to my suspicions, leading to a complicated family dynamic where trust and protection clashed.

Chapter 2.

In the morning light, I arrived at my sister Tammy's condo at the Preserve at Saddle Brook Crossing, where she lived with a collection of her foster kids. I had told her to be ready by six, but upon ringing the doorbell, I was greeted by a quirky little girl named Abigail Grimm, who had been left in Tammy's care without a suitcase. Abigail, sporting an army-style haircut and an endearing smile, informed me that we were waiting for Tammy.

Inside, the condo was typical of Tammy's warm but cluttered style, filled with sentimental decor and the comforting scents of baked goods. As we settled into the living room, the news played in the background, showcasing a tragic house fire that left two brothers dead. Abigail, seemingly unfazed, turned off the television at my request and tried to engage me with a humorous joke involving pi, revealing a delightful innocence amid the dark tone of the world outside.

Eventually, Tammy joined us, bringing her cheerful presence into the room, dressed in refreshing new attire, having made muffins for breakfast. However, amidst the cheerful atmosphere, I felt a surge of frustration about her decision to bring Abigail along to Maggie's wedding without proper notice. It was clear from Tammy's explanations that Abigail was facing challenges, including head lice, and the thought of her accompanying us made me uneasy.

Despite my reservations, Tammy passionately defended the decision. She emphasized that Abigail was just a sweet girl caught in difficult circumstances. I was reminded of times when Tammy had stood by me during my own hardships, making it hard to argue against her kindness.

In an effort to convince her, I pointed out the complications of taking a foster child out of state, but thoughtful as she was, she had already secured the necessary approvals. I knew I couldn't say no to Tammy, given her unwavering support in the past, and after a moment of reflection, I relented. Thus, I found myself on board with the unexpected addition to our journey, despite the challenges it presented .

Chapter 6.

In the aftermath of a tragic wedding, the catering staff hurriedly cleared the venue, encouraging guests to take home centerpieces as they sought to end the event and allow the family to grieve privately. Guests whispered about the circumstances surrounding Aidan's death, often referring to it as "a terrible accident." While pretending to express condolences, they exchanged thoughts on Aidan's troubled life, including his history of therapy and loss, revealing their judgments rather than genuine empathy.

Frank, still in his tuxedo, observed the departing guests who avoided eye contact, realizing that words failed to capture the gravity of the situation. One man, Armando Castado, approached Frank with a business card and an offer to listen anytime, to which Frank felt grateful yet resistant. He worried about his daughter, Margaret, who grieved away from him.

Recalling the horrifying moment after the gunshot, Frank vividly described the basement where Aidan lay lifeless, a scene burned into his memory. He attempted to call for help, but Hugo, a companion, aggressively prevented him, ensuring silence in light of the situation. When Hugo deemed it safe for others to enter, Errol and Gerry, both unsympathetic, confronted the aftermath with a chilling detachment, brainstorming how to handle the fallout while Frank clamored for answers regarding his own safety in light of their actions.

Gerry outlined a cover story: Aidan missed the wedding, and they found him deceased, ensuring no blame fell on any of them. Tension rose as Frank questioned the morality behind their planned deceit. He could see how they avoided accountability for their actions, leading to Aidan's tragic end.

Amid the chilling exchange, Errol casually mentioned his estrangement from Aidan, revealing he had taken a DNA test years prior—confirming that Aidan wasn't his biological son. Errol showed little remorse, arguing he had financially supported Aidan but neglected emotional ties, failing to explain his rejection. As their conversation concluded, Frank felt a profound realization that Maggie was free of her ties to the family, reflecting his own intent to leave Osprey Cove behind, mirroring Aidan's severed connections as he processed the haunting and complex aftermath of the wedding.

Chapter 3.

My name is Frank Szatowski, and at fifty-two, I've dedicated most of my adult life to driving a package car for UPS. These large brown trucks are ubiquitous in neighborhoods, delivering goods from the internet. After serving in the army, I began my career as a driver, and I've recently been honored by the Circle of Honor for twenty-five years without an accident.

Despite the physically demanding nature of the job—where I now lift everything from futons to car tires—I make a decent living, often pulling in over a hundred grand with overtime. My financial situation seems stable: my Jeep is paid off, my mortgage is close to being settled, and I have no credit card debt. I had been looking forward to an early retirement with a comfortable pension and healthcare. Until my wife passed away and complications arose with my daughter, Maggie, I felt truly blessed.

Our recent conversation revealed an important event: Maggie's wedding, scheduled for July 23rd. Initially, she called to catch up and share news about her fiancé, Aidan, whom she met last Halloween at a costume party, where they dressed as characters from **The Office.** As she spoke with excitement about their connection, I was caught off guard by the quick timeline of their relationship, having only known each other for six months.

Aidan, it turns out, is an artist rather than a housepainter, which surprised me. Maggie mentioned he was building his reputation and also teaching art at MassArt. I wanted to support her but was concerned about such an unconventional career choice, which led to a few awkward moments when I pressed for information about Aidan's financial stability.

Maggie answered other relationship questions, like Aidan's family background; she loved his mother but avoided delving into details about his father's profession, hinting at complications. My persistence furrowed our conversation, and Maggie clearly wanted to steer away from the topic. She suggested we discuss everything further over dinner in Boston, dropping the name of an Irish pub where we could meet.

As our conversation concluded, I expressed regret for the challenges of the past few years; however, before I could finish, Maggie had already hung up.

Also by Jason Rekulak

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Chapter 3.

The chapter opens with an upbeat description of a road trip, highlighting the perfect weather, a reliable Jeep Wrangler, and the thoughtful packing of snacks and necessities by Tammy, a traveling companion. However, the mood shifts with the introduction of Abigail, a talkative child in the backseat, who embodies a type of energetic foster child that frequently seeks attention and engagement. Her incessant questions about the impending wedding of Maggie and Aidan reveal her curiosity and eagerness to understand the dynamics of the event, reflecting her desire for connection amid her trauma.

Abigail is seen cross-referencing her questions with **Lady Evelyn's Complete Guide to Wedding Etiquette**, an outdated book that bears the scent of neglect. She meticulously details wedding customs, such as the necessity of walking on the bride's left side to avoid bad luck while urging her companion to adhere to the strict etiquette rules provided by the tome. Despite Frank's apparent discomfort, Tammy shows enthusiasm for Abigail's reading, even as they both begin to question the relevance of the book's advice in a modern context.

The conversation drifts toward financial matters related to the wedding plans, where the implications of wealth come to the fore. Frank reveals his contribution of eight thousand dollars for alcohol, prompting surprise from Abigail. Tammy clarifies that while Aidan's family is wealthy—thanks to hard work and education—the two adults, Frank and Tammy, lead an average middle-class lifestyle.

Throughout the dialogue, Abigail's innocent inquiry into the nature of this wealth exposes the contrasts between her life experiences and those of the affluent families involved in the wedding. The chapter seamlessly weaves themes of wealth, class, and social expectations into their banter, combining humor with deeper reflections on familial and societal dynamics.

As the conversation evolves, themes of ambition and hard work emerge, with Tammy encouraging Abigail to dream big, while Frank challenges the façade of self-made success surrounding rich individuals like Aidan's father. The chapter concludes with a blend of playful exchanges and sobering revelations about socioeconomic realities, showcasing the complexities of their relationships as they prepare for the wedding.

III. The Rehearsal

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Chapter 10.

After the sun set, the atmosphere at the Osprey Lodge shifted as candles were lit at the tables. Guests mingled in new pairs, sharing stories and laughter. Amidst the lively conversation, I discreetly slipped Aidan's phone, left unattended on the table, into my lap while excusing myself for a restroom break. However, my real intention was to seek out Catherine Gardner, Aidan's mother, as Gwendolyn had ominously hinted at her significance.

Navigating the lodge, I was greeted by a long line of women waiting for the restroom before making my way upstairs. I knocked on the door of the master suite, greeted by silence. With Aidan's phone, I unlocked the door and stepped into a dimly lit hallway that led to a room filled with clothes and an overwhelming garbage-like odor. The chaos of the room was startling, as dresses and blouses lay strewn about, creating an unsettling impression of neglect.

To my surprise, there sat Catherine Gardner, her appearance bearing little resemblance to the poised woman I had seen in photographs. Clad in a stained bathrobe and with unkempt makeup, she seemed detached from reality, engrossed in a game show. When she noticed me, her initial expression suggested confusion, but upon hearing my connection to Margaret, she attempted to muster her hospitality.

Despite the clutter around us, Catherine poured gin into glasses and commented on the challenges of online shopping. She quickly warmed up, sharing insights about Aidan and addressing troubling rumors, specifically mentioning Dawn Taggart. Her words became increasingly animated as she recounted the complexities surrounding Aidan's relationship with Dawn, her entitlement, and claims about their familial connection.

A disturbing revelation emerged about Catherine's husband Errol, who allegedly had a sordid history of affairs that complicated their family dynamics. The conversation swayed abruptly, oscillating between jest and a horrifying recollection of Catherine's own violent response to Dawn's demands, culminating in an unintended incident on the stairs.

As my thoughts raced with disbelief, the arrival of others disrupted our exchange. I tried to extract clarity about Margaret's involvement, only for Catherine's state to deteriorate further, leading to a hurried exit for me as I confronted unsettling truths regarding my daughter's relationship amidst a veil of lies.

Chapter 8.

In the lead-up to the wedding, time seemed to fly by. With Maggie and the Gardners managing the bulk of the arrangements, I still found numerous tasks on my own to-do list. I rummaged through my attic and found my old tuxedo, the last time I had worn it being my wedding day twenty-eight years prior. Although it no longer fit, nostalgia filled me as I sifted through its pockets, discovering a cocktail napkin stained with Colleen's lipstick, which I decided to keep for good luck.

For the wedding, I opted to rent a light-gray summer tuxedo from Men's Wearhouse, complete with a matching vest and bow tie. The salesman, a young man with pink hair and piercings, was eager to make a sale and successfully convinced me to purchase a nine-piece accessory package including shoes and cuff links. My daughter's wedding left me with a feeling of goodwill towards everyone around me.

My primary responsibility for the weekend was preparing a toast for the reception. The bridal websites suggested that the ideal length was ninety seconds, encouraging me to speak from the heart. However, as I attempted to write, I found myself with eighteen pages of notes, struggling to condense my thoughts into the allotted time. Each writing session seemed to exacerbate the issue by increasing the length of my notes.

I also tried to form a bond with my future son-in-law, Aidan, by proposing we attend a Red Sox game. However, Maggie informed me that Aidan wasn't particularly interested in sports. I then suggested a visit to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, where he could show me his favorite exhibits, but despite our shared interests, we could never pin down a date. After several attempts met with excuses from Aidan, I realized he might not be keen to spend time together, something I chose not to take personally, acknowledging he already had a father figure.

Maggie, too, seemed preoccupied, and I found that disheartening. Although we had re-established communication, her busy schedule with wedding planning and her job left little room for our conversations, which often ended quickly. She reassured me, promising more family time during our stay at Osprey Cove before the wedding, where we could even relive our past camping adventures, like canoeing together—an idea that delighted me. As July progressed, I anticipated our reunion while vowing to give Maggie the space she needed until the big day.

About the Author

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Chapter 7.

In the chapter titled "The Last One at the Wedding," the unsettling atmosphere begins with Abigail's terrified screams echoing through the cottage. Frank and Tammy rush to her room, where they find Abigail cornered in fear, pointing at an unseen threat. Her hysteria presents an unnerving challenge, leaving Frank concerned about her behavior and potential outbursts during the upcoming wedding.

Tammy attempts to calm Abigail, but the child remains inconsolable, leading Frank to examine the room. Upon noticing an unexplored closet door, Frank opens it, triggering more panic from Abigail. He discovers what initially appears to be a wig but soon realizes it is a nest of daddy longlegs, which multiply in the dim light. A mix of fascination and revulsion fills Frank as he inadvertently becomes the target of these fleeing spiders. He snaps into action, sealing the closet and attempting to reassure the frightened child while deflecting Tammy's concerns about the infestation.

Determined to handle the situation without calling for professional help, Frank resorts to using his shoe to combat the spider overload, with vivid imagery capturing the gruesome task at hand. Once he subdues the creepy crawlies, he cleans the space, though the impact is far from refreshing. When he suggests that Abigail might still be convinced to return indoors, her anxiety remains high, further complicating matters.

As they discuss Abigail's options, Tammy proposes that Frank and Abigail switch rooms to spare the latter from lingering fears. Initially resistant, Frank's objections stem from a feeling of entitlement to his luxurious accommodations, juxtaposed with Abigail's traumatic past of living outdoors. Despite his insistence on retaining his room, Frank ultimately realizes that logic and compassion must prevail for Abigail's sake.

The chapter concludes with Frank reluctantly acknowledging Tammy's viewpoint, culminating in his frustrated acceptance of the room swap as a necessary compromise that prioritizes Abigail's comfort over his own preferences. The scenario not only highlights the tension between the characters but also addresses deeper themes of care, childhood trauma, and the sacrifices necessary in relationships.

Chapter 7.

On a Sunday morning, the protagonist, Frankie, returns home to Pennsylvania and finds an elegant wedding invitation from the Gardners, inviting him to the wedding of their son Aidan to Maggie, Frank's daughter. Immediately, he receives a call from his sister, Tammy, who excitedly sings about the wedding and wants to know if things have improved between Frank and Maggie. Although she wants to hear about Frank's recent dinner with Aidan, he is preoccupied with a mysterious black bag he discovered in Aidan's toilet tank, suspecting it might contain cash.

As they discuss Aidan, Frank shares his uncertainty about the young man, describing him as polite but quiet, while Tammy insists he's a good match for Maggie, even comparing him favorably to her past relationships. Although Frank hopes to learn more about Aidan, he admits to being intimidated by Aidan's success and the Gardners' status, which makes him feel like an outsider.

Tammy reveals that she asked Maggie about a prenuptial agreement and learns that they have one, which ensures an equal division of assets in the event of divorce. This discovery surprises Frank, as he feels

unprepared for such a serious commitment so soon in their relationship. Still, Tammy insists he should support his daughter's decision wholeheartedly.

Concerned about making a contribution to the wedding, Frank decides he wants to cover the alcohol expenses, estimating it to be between \$5,600 to \$8,000. Maggie is resistant, believing Errol Gardner, Aidan's father, wouldn't accept such help because of Frank's financial situation. Determined, Frank asks for Errol's number, and despite Maggie's hesitation, she eventually agrees.

When Errol calls Frank, they bond over baseball, bolstering Frank's confidence. The conversation shifts to the wedding, and Frank expresses his desire to cover the bar tab. They engage in a playful negotiation, ultimately settling on an \$8,000 contribution. Feeling a sense of pride, Frank understands that this financial gesture is not just about money but a significant investment in his daughter's future .

Chapter 5.

In a tense evening, Tammy urged Frankie to eliminate a precarious map found in Abigail's possession, emphasizing its potential danger. As they sat at the kitchen table with cups of decaf, they scrutinized the map's topography—a design that seemed to animate under their gaze, pressing Frankie to consider his options: destroy it or hand it over to the FBI, which he was adamant against. The weight of Aidan Taggart's untimely death hung heavily on Frankie, especially regarding the unresolved fate of his daughter Maggie's potential leverage against the Gardners.

Determined to dispose of the map, Frankie prepared for a ritualistic burning in his backyard. The coals glowed invitingly in the hibachi grill as he contemplated the significance of this decision. He could either eliminate the last tangible connection to the Gardners or use it as a teaching moment for Maggie—demonstrating trust and the lessons he had gleaned from past mistakes. At the last minute, he opted to keep the map, instinctively sensing that it might prove crucial for Maggie in the future. After placing the map back in his pocket, he attempted to call her, reached her at her apartment, and framed his words with secrecy.

Their dialogue illuminated parental concerns and an underlying connection. Maggie, unaware of the gravity of the map, responded cheerfully but soon piqued interest once the topic of Abigail arose. Frankie revealed that Aidan had left Abigail a critical map marking Lake Wyndham, suggesting it had significant implications for their safety. Maggie's inquiries about the map's visibility and the presence of social workers escalated the tension, forcing Frankie to clarify the situation. He hesitated but eventually suggested the possibility of handing the map over to Maggie for her safety.

However, Maggie's upcoming trip to Madrid complicated matters, revealing the urgency of their situation. Frankie felt an internal tug-of-war between the need to protect the map's secrets and the anxiety of its existence should he wait for Maggie to return, contemplating whether to ultimately proceed with the burning as an act of closure .

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