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Meant to Be



# Meant to Be

A NOVEL

EMILY GIFFIN



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## CHAPTER 1

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# Joe

I don't remember my father. At least that's what I tell people when they ask if I do. I was barely three years old when he died. I once read that it's impossible to have memories much before the age language fully develops. Apparently, we need words to translate our experiences, and if memories aren't encoded linguistically, they become irretrievable. Lost in our minds. So I've accepted that my vague recollections of the day he was put to rest at Arlington National Cemetery are fabricated—an amalgam of photographs, news footage, and accounts from my mother that were somehow planted in my brain.

But there is one memory that can't be explained away so easily. In it, I am wearing red footie pajamas, padding down the wide-plank wood floors of our home in Southampton. It is nighttime, and I am following the white glow of Christmas lights, along with the hum of my parents' voices. I reach the end of the hallway and peer around the corner, hiding so I don't get in trouble. My mother spots me and orders me back to bed, but my father overrules her, laughing. I am overcome with joy as I run to him, climbing onto his lap and inhaling the cherry-vanilla scent of his pipe. He wraps his arms around me, and I put my head on his chest, listening to the sound of his heart beating in my ear. My eyelids are heavy, but I fight sleep, focusing on one gold ball on our tree, wanting to stay with him as long as I can.

I guess it's possible that this memory, too, is illusory, a scene I imagined or dreamed. But it almost doesn't matter. It *feels* so real. So I've decided that it *is*, clinging to it as the one thing of my father's that belongs only to me.

I know what people would say to this. They'd say, No, Joe, you have so much more than that. You have his wristwatch and his rocking chair. You have his eyes and his smile. You have his *name*.

It always comes back to that name—Joseph S. Kingsley—which we also share with *his* father, my grandfather. The S is for Schuyler, the name of the family who landed in New Amsterdam via the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century. Somehow, we spun off from those folks—as did the Oyster Bay Roosevelts—privilege and wealth begetting more privilege and wealth as a handful of families intermarried, curried favor, and became increasingly prominent in business, the military, politics, and society. My great-grandfather Samuel S. Kingsley, a financier and philanthropist, had been close friends with Teddy Roosevelt, the two boys growing up a few blocks apart in Manhattan, then attending Harvard together. When Samuel died in a freak hunting accident, Teddy became a mentor to my grandfather, recruiting him for his Great White Fleet and eventually introducing him to my grandmother, Sylvia, a fiery young suffragist from yet another prominent New York family.

Joseph and Sylvia married in 1917, right before my grandfather shipped out for the First World War. While Joseph commanded a Sampson-class destroyer and earned the Navy Cross, my grandmother continued to battle for women's right to vote, helping to organize the "Winning Plan," a blitz campaign that lobbied southern states to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment. Her fight would last longer than the war, but on August 18, 1920, the suffragists finally got the thirty-sixth state they needed when a young man in the Tennessee statehouse changed his vote at the eleventh hour, crediting an impassioned note he'd received from his mother.

My grandmother would tell this story often, citing it as an auspicious sign for her own son—my father—born that very same summer day. Two more boys and three girls would follow, making six kids in total, and although each had unique gifts and abilities, my grandmother turned out to

be right. My father *was* special, her eldest son emerging as the standout of the Kingsley clan.

My father excelled in everything as a boy, then graduated at the top of his class at Harvard before matriculating at Yale Law. When World War II broke out during his second year at Yale, he entered the NROTC, then joined my grandfather in the Pacific. Whole books have been written about their time in combat, but the most significant moment came in late 1944, when the two Joseph Kingsleys found themselves side by side in the Battle for Leyte Gulf, the rear admiral and lieutenant junior grade narrowly surviving a series of kamikaze attacks, along with a typhoon, before securing the beachhead for the Sixth U.S. Army. Upon their return home, a photo was snapped of my grandmother embracing her husband and son on the tarmac. The image would appear on the cover of *Life* magazine, along with a one-word headline HEROES.

After the war, my grandfather served in Truman's State Department, while my father pursued his love of naval aviation. He completed advanced flight training, then went on to test pilot school, kicking ass and taking names. Nobody worked harder, earned higher marks, or had more raw ambition than my father, but he also knew how to have a good time and could drink anyone under the table. He was a man of contradictions or, as one biographer described: "Rugged yet debonair, brash yet introverted, Joe, Jr., was a disciplined dreamer and a risk-taking perfectionist."

It's a description I've often returned to in my mind, though I find myself wondering whether it was true, or if people just see what they want to see.

One thing I know for sure, though, is that my father had no enemies. It's a claim heard in eulogies or biographies, especially about men who die young, but in my father's case, it was the truth. Everyone loved him. Of course, that included women, and to his mother's frustration, he loved an awful lot of them as a young man—and had trouble choosing just one.

That all changed in April 1952, when my father attended a state dinner at the White House and met my mother, Dorothy "Dottie" Sedgwick. The daughter of a diplomat, Dottie was a gorgeous, young socialite, fresh out of Sarah Lawrence, who had just been named to *Look* magazine's best-dressed list. What intrigued my father the most, though, wasn't her beauty



or style but her poise and worldliness. She seemed so much older than her nineteen years, and after overhearing snippets of a conversation she was having with Queen Juliana of the Netherlands, he was smitten.

Later that evening, he asked her to dance, and the two hit it off, talking and laughing as he twirled her all over the White House ballroom. The following morning, *The Washington Post* ran their photo in the lifestyle section, along with a description of my father's finely tailored ivory dinner jacket and my mother's powder-blue chiffon gown. The society pages followed every move of their ensuing courtship, and by the time they were engaged a year later, Joe and Dottie were household names. America's sweethearts.

A lavish wedding was planned in the Hamptons, but the Korean War put things on hold, as my father returned to combat. From the cockpit of his F-86 Sabre, Captain Kingsley would down six enemy aircraft, becoming one of only two navy aviators to achieve ace status, before returning home to marry Dottie in the summer of 1954. Their wedding was *the* social event of the year, solidifying my mother as a fashion icon. Women everywhere, including Audrey Hepburn, emulated her tea-length wedding dress, paired with elbow-length gloves.

Shortly thereafter, my father announced his bid for New York's junior Senate seat. He ran as a Democrat but garnered vast bipartisan support and won the election handily, becoming a rising political star. My grandmother was thrilled and my mother relieved, believing that politics would keep her husband out of harm's way. For several golden years, they were happy, splitting their time between Georgetown, New York City, and Southampton.

But in the fall of 1957, just as my parents were planning to start a family, *Sputnik 1* ushered in the Space Race, and my father grew restless, dreaming of flight. My mother begged him to stay the safer course, but my father had an iron will, and eventually he left the Senate for NASA, the agency he had helped create. Anyone alive at that time knows that astronauts were larger-than-life figures, revered as America's greatest heroes in a global conflict between democracy and communism. The ultimate goal, as President Kennedy proclaimed before a joint session of Congress, was "landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the

Earth.” It seemed an impossible dream to most, but not to my father and his cohorts in the early days at Cape Canaveral.

My mother put on a brave public face, as all astronauts’ wives were required to do, but she lived in constant fear of what might happen at the end of the next thirty-second countdown. To make matters worse, she suffered a series of three miscarriages. Her doctor couldn’t find a medical explanation, but my mother believed it was stress over my father’s occupation. Her heartbreak was compounded by resentment.

Then, miraculously, in December of 1963, she had a healthy baby boy—*me*—and things were good again, especially after my father promised her that he would leave the space program by my third birthday. It was an arbitrary deadline, and he ended up asking for a slight extension so that he could accept one last mission—a low Earth orbital test of the Apollo command and service module scheduled for February 1967.

Of course, that mission never flew. Instead, on January 27, 1967, a flash fire broke out in the cabin of the module during a simulated rehearsal, asphyxiating the four men inside: Gus Grissom, Ed White, Roger Chaffee, and my father, Joseph Kingsley, Jr.

The rest is history, as they say. The shock of the nation. The endless *if onlys* and *what should have beens*. Much was made of the idea that my father likely would have returned to public service after his final mission, with aspirations beyond the Senate. Most pundits believe he would have secured the Democratic nomination over Humphrey in 1968 and beaten Nixon in the general election to become the thirty-seventh president of the United States.

Instead, a nation mourned its fallen hero and pinned its hopes and dreams on a little boy.

For much of my childhood, I didn’t see it this way. All I knew was that people revered my father, which made me proud and happy. I liked it when strangers stopped me on the street to talk about him. Mostly they offered condolences or shared an anecdote about what he’d meant to them. Sometimes they talked about the day he died, everyone seeming to remember exactly where they were when they heard the news. Regardless of what they shared, my mind would inevitably return to that moment on his lap in front of our Christmas tree.

As I got older, there was a shift. I still viewed my father as a hero, but I began to feel the heavy weight of so many expectations. People often used outlandish descriptions like *heir apparent* and *America's prince*, prodding me to honor my father's "legacy." Meanwhile, my mother constantly brought him up, comparing and measuring me, especially when I got in any kind of trouble in school. Didn't I want to be a great man like my father? I learned to stare back at her and nod as solemnly as I could. I certainly wasn't going to tell her the truth. That I really just wanted to be a *good* man. My *own* man.

My mother would have fainted if she heard me say that. One of her favorite passages in the Bible was "For unto whomsoever much is given, of him much shall be required." I knew where she was coming from. Being a Kingsley meant access to the best private schools, private clubs, private bankers, private planes. I was grateful for the blessings in my life. But damn. My father was killed in a fiery explosion when I was three—which, from my vantage point, felt a hell of a lot more like "From whom much is taken, much is expected."

Bottom line, I would have traded all the pride and privilege of being a Kingsley for a regular name like Smith or Jones and a dad who wasn't dead. Hell, I would have traded it for far less. Maybe just a few more years with him and more than one memory that might not even be real.

## CHAPTER 2

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# Cate

**M**y father died in a car accident in Nevada when I was three. I was too young to understand, grasping only what my mother told me: that my dad wasn't coming home and that we were going to live with my grandmother in a place called Hackensack. I remember packing up our apartment in Las Vegas and loading our belongings into the back of my mom's blue Pinto. I cried saying goodbye to Pepper, my black kitten, who we left with a neighbor because my grandmother was allergic. It later struck me as odd that I felt sadder about Pepper than about my father.

When I got to kindergarten, I noticed that my classmates put dads in their drawings, along with brothers and sisters and dogs. I had a grandmother, but she was mean to my mom, so I left her out of my pictures. Once I drew my father standing on the other side of me, and my grandmother got mad, calling him a loser, making my mom cry.

A short time after that, my mom and I moved into our own apartment. We didn't see much of my grandmother anymore, which was fine by me. Even better, my mom let me get a new cat, which I named Pepper, Jr. Around that time, she also gave me a photograph of my dad—the only one I'd ever seen. It was black and white, but I could somehow tell that he had blond hair and blue eyes like me. In it, he is leaning on a doorframe, wearing a plaid shirt and cowboy boots. He has long sideburns, and his expression is plain—not happy or sad. It's not a lot to go on, but from

there I filled in the gaps, imagining that he had been the strong, silent type, rugged and intrepid and a bit mysterious. Like the Marlboro Man. My mom didn't corroborate my vision, but she didn't contradict it, either. In fact, she didn't talk about him much at all, and I learned not to ask questions. It made her too sad.

Eventually, my mom began looking for a new husband. She was beautiful—taller and thinner than other mothers, with long blond hair that she set in rollers at night. Wherever she went, men stopped to talk to her. She also met a lot of them at the Manna Diner, where she worked as a waitress. They'd ask for her phone number, and she would pretty much always give it to them, even to the bald, ugly guys, because she said you never could tell if a fellow had money. My mom talked incessantly of money and men, making both seem like prerequisites to happiness.

In my mind, it didn't add up. I was poor. I was fatherless. But I was still happy. I loved our cozy, cluttered third-floor apartment at Queen's Court with its shag green carpet and concrete balcony with a bird's-eye view of the parking lot. I would sit out there for hours, playing with my Barbies while I waited for my mom to get home from work. There was always something exciting happening down below—from a kickball game to a screaming match to a make-out session—and it was almost always more entertaining than whatever Gloria, the old lady who babysat me, was watching on our color television, its small screen distorted with zigzag lines and sometimes a white-out blizzard of fuzz. As far as I was concerned, our television was the only thing that needed an upgrade. Otherwise, I thought our life was just fine.

Until my mom got a new boyfriend, that is. Whenever she did, things got messed up. Either I would get kicked out of the bed my mom and I shared and be forced to sleep on the hard, scratchy sofa, or she would disappear for days at a time, leaving me with Gloria. The worst part, though, was what happened when those men inevitably vanished, and my mom would sleep, drink, and cry all hours of the day. Eventually, she would get over it, but only when another man came along. She didn't know how to be happy without one and constantly dreamed of our being rescued and taken to a nice house in Montclair. I'd never been, but she said it was a suburb in New Jersey where rich people lived.

In theory, I understood the fairy tale she was after, and I was hopeful she would find it, for her sake and mine. I dreamed of a kind stepfather, imagining Mike Brady: a handsome architect who kissed my mom in the kitchen and helped me with my homework. Even better if he came with three sons, a dog, and an Astroturf backyard complete with a swing set and teeter-totter. In reality, I knew that wasn't going to happen. I also intuitively understood that *no* man was better than the *wrong* man. If only my mom had agreed.

When I was ten years old, she met Chip, a cop who came into the diner and charmed her over his sliders and coconut cream pie before leaving a tip bigger than the check. His phone number was written on the back.

"He's *perfect*," my mom said as she got ready for bed that night, slathering Oil of Olay on her face and neck.

"And he wasn't wearing a wedding ring?" I asked—because that had happened a few times.

"I'm *positive*," she said. "I checked his hand the second he sat down."

"And he had good manners?" I asked.

This was her favorite screening device, though she went out with the rude ones, too.

"Yes," she said. "Not a crumb left on the table, and he even stacked his dishes and folded his napkin on his plate."

This seemed a little extreme to me, like a red flag of a different kind. My mom and I were messy and liked it that way, calling our bed a "nest"—which we never made.

When I pointed this out, she interrupted me. "I'm telling you, Cate. He's dreamy. And I'm going to marry him."

She sounded so certain that I almost believed her this time, and I was excited when Chip came over a few days later to take my mom out on a date. Without her even asking me, I put on a dress, along with a ribbon in my hair, determined to make a good impression. If things didn't work out between them, I wasn't going to be the reason, as I had been in the past, when other men decided they didn't want the "baggage" of a kid.

When Chip walked into the living room, I stood up from the sofa, where I'd been quietly reading a book, and made eye contact with him. I

was shy, so that wasn't the easiest thing to do. It didn't help that he was taller and bigger than her usual boyfriends.

"Hi, Cate!" he said in a booming voice that matched his stature.

"Hello, *Officer Toledano*," I said, as my mom had instructed.

"Call me Chip!"

I glanced at my mom, who nodded her permission.

"Hi, Chip," I said.

Beaming down at me, he handed me a plastic bag and said, "I brought you a little something."

I smiled and thanked him, expecting candy or a drugstore trinket, the two most common gifts given to me by my mom's boyfriends. Instead, I reached into the bag and pulled out a boxed Barbie *with* a Ken doll. The tanned Malibu couple sported matching teal and purple monogrammed swimsuits. I was sold.

—

I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN better, of course. It all turned out to be a ruse—a *really* good act that lasted nearly three months, just long enough for Chip to propose and my mom to say yes. Shortly after that, Chip showed his true colors, and I realized that he was not only a neat freak but also a jerk, putting my mom and me down at every turn. I quickly came to hate and fear him, and did my best to talk my mom out of getting married. But she didn't listen, making endless excuses for him. Her favorite was all the stress he was under as an "officer of the law"—she'd say that there was no more difficult job in the world.

"Things will be better once we're married," she promised me. "Just hang in there and give him a chance."

I tried to believe her. I *wanted* to believe her. But Chip's moods only worsened, along with his verbal assaults and threats. I told myself there was no way he'd physically hurt my mom, no matter how mad he got, because men didn't *hit* women, especially policemen, who were the good guys.

One Saturday night in December, Chip invited my mom to the chief of police's Christmas party. She was excited and spent all afternoon primping in our bathroom as I played the role of her lady-in-waiting, handing her

various makeup brushes and bottles of lotion and perfume and advising her on jewelry and shoes. When we were finished, she looked more gorgeous than usual, her blond hair feathered around her face, her fingers and toes lacquered red to match her sparkly sequined dress. When he arrived, I went to the door with her, excited to see Chip's reaction, expecting him to gush over her. Instead, he looked my mom up and down, made a face, and said, "You're going for the hooker look tonight, I see?"

My heart sank, and my mom's face fell.

"Who are you trying to impress anyway?" Chip said, his words slurring like he'd been drinking. "Nick?"

Nick was Chip's partner—who I'd noticed was a dead ringer for the Six Million Dollar Man. Unfortunately, my mom had made the mistake of sharing my observation with Chip a few weeks earlier; he'd promptly lost his mind, accusing her of wanting to fuck Nick. I'd heard the f-word before, but never as a verb and not in any relation to my mom.

"I got dressed up for you," my mom explained, desperation in her eyes. "Not Nick."

"Well, I think it's a mighty big coincidence," Chip said. "You look like shit when it's just the two of us and then you put on that dress when you know Nick's going to be there."

My mom stammered that she would change into something else as he continued to berate her, following her down the hall to our bedroom. I stood frozen in the hallway, wondering if I should go with them or escape to Gloria's apartment. Sensing that my mom might need reinforcements, I decided to stay by her side, and even forced myself to take a deep breath and defend her.

"Chip. Just so you know, she didn't buy that dress for Nick. She bought it for *you*. It cost a lot of money, and she thought you would love it."

I knew it was the wrong thing to say because Chip began shouting at the top of his lungs that I was a rude, spoiled brat. He then turned his wrath back to my mom, questioning the way she had raised me and whether he even wanted to be married to someone with such a disrespectful brat of a kid. By then, my mom's makeup was ruined, mascara streaming down her face as she sobbed that she was sorry. That we were *both* sorry.



“What are you sorry for, Jan?” he yelled.

I could tell it was a trick question, and my mom knew it, too.

“For everything,” she whispered, which seemed like a safe response.

“For being a slut?” he said.

My mom opened her mouth to answer, but he cut her off, yelling louder. “For wanting to fuck Nick?”

“I don’t—” she whimpered. “I only want you—”

“For all the guys you’ve fucked in town? Look at you in that slutty dress. The town whore of Hackensack. Jesus, we *have* to move.”

As he continued to rant, my mom frantically went through her closet, then pulled out a brown polyester pantsuit. “What about this? Do you like this?”

“Are you serious? Wow,” Chip said. He shook his head, then looked at me. “Your mother here has two extremes. She can look like a slut...or she can look like a dyke. Whaddya think, Cate? Would I rather be seen with a slut or a dyke?”

I didn’t know what a dyke was, but I could tell he didn’t consider it a compliment.

“I can’t take you anywhere, can I, Jan?” he yelled. “You’re an embarrassment. A goddamn embarrassment.”

At that point, I felt a surge of hope that he might finally just dump her, like the others had. My mom would be sad for a while, but she would get over it, and we could go on with our lives. Instead, he shoved my mom into the closet door. As she crashed against it, then fell to the floor, he yelled at her to get up and get ready, that they were going to be late. When she didn’t move, he kicked her in the stomach. I watched in horror and wondered if I should call the police.

In the next instant, I remembered, with a fresh wave of terror, that he *was* the police, and there wasn’t anything anybody could do to stop him.

## CHAPTER 3

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# Joe

Growing up, I didn't have a father or siblings but was very close to my aunts and uncles and cousins, especially on the Kingsley side. Sadly, my father's death wouldn't be the last tragedy in our family, not by a long shot. The year after he passed away, my father's second-oldest sister, Betty, died in a house fire (on Christmas Eve, no less); the following year, my three-year-old cousin Eloise wandered out of their yard in Sag Harbor and drowned in their neighbors' pool; and when I was eight, my oldest cousin, Frederick, died in an avalanche while skiing in the French Alps.

People called it the "Kingsley curse." The phrase infuriated my mother, perhaps because it also terrified her, especially when my cousins and I were having a good time. We loved to take risks on land and water, and I was typically the ringleader—surfing, skiing, hang gliding, rock climbing, you name it. Someone was always being hauled off to the emergency room for one mishap or another, which we cousins wore as badges of honor, keeping a running tally of stitches and broken bones. My mother didn't find any of it even remotely funny and lived in a constant state of dread that I'd be critically injured. I guess I can't blame her for that, given what she and our family had been through, but it still seemed unfair. She wanted me to follow in my father's footsteps, and to me, a

sense of adventure came with that territory. I wasn't as smart as my father, but I could be as *brave* as he had been, if only my mother would let me.

Fortunately, my father's mother (whom I called Gary, because I couldn't pronounce Granny when I was little) understood me and gave me the freedom to be exactly who I was. The only thing that she asked of me was that I fulfill my own unique potential. She made me feel special, and when I messed up, she was always the first to forgive me. I adored her, and never turned down the opportunity to spend one-on-one time with her, whether at her home in Southampton or her apartment on the Upper East Side. I especially loved when she would pick me up from school and walk me over to Tavern on the Green for ice cream. We had some of our best conversations over hot-fudge sundaes and root beer floats.

"Tell me what's going on in your world, Joey," she'd always say.

I knew that unlike other grown-ups, who were just going through the motions, my grandmother was seeking an interesting answer.

One afternoon when I was about ten, she asked the question, and I told her about Charlie Vance getting bullied at recess.

"Why was he bullied?" she asked, taking a dainty bite of whipped cream while I took a spoon and dug down deep into mine.

"Because he's a sissy," I said.

"And what makes him a sissy?"

"You know. The usual sissy stuff," I said, explaining that Charlie couldn't throw a ball to save his life and was afraid of spiders and talked with a goofy lisp. And the most egregious example: he was rumored to play with his sister's dolls.

My grandmother nodded and said, "Hmm. And when people tease him, do you stick up for him?"

"Yeah," I said, which was true, but she may have guessed by the look on my face that my efforts to stand up for Charlie were halfhearted at best. Mostly, I just wanted him to fall in line and stop being his own worst enemy.

Gary suddenly put her spoon down and stared into my eyes. "Joey. Are you aware that Charlie might be homosexual?"

I gazed back at her, processing this. It had never occurred to me that Charlie was gay—nor had it crossed my mind that anyone our age could

be—but I wanted my grandmother, the wisest person I knew, to think I, too, was wise in the ways of the world. I somberly nodded.

“And if that’s the case, Charlie is going to have a very difficult life, Joey,” she said. “He can’t help who he is, and you need to do everything you can to ease his way.”

“I will, Gary,” I said, feeling ashamed that I hadn’t done more for Charlie to date, and that what I had seen as tomfoolery by my more rambunctious classmates actually had shadings of cruelty.

“You’re a natural leader. People listen to you,” she continued. “I’ve watched you in action.”

“Where?” I said, picturing my grandmother holding up binoculars to the school yard fence.

“When you’re with your cousins,” she said. “All the time.”

I looked across the table at my grandmother, feeling so proud.

“Did I get that from my father?” I asked. “Was he that way?”

She shook her head, which shocked me. “Don’t get me wrong. He was a good-hearted boy like you are,” she said. “But he wasn’t as outgoing or brave.”

I stared at her, finding it hard to believe that I could, at any age, be braver than someone who became an ace fighter pilot and astronaut. I said as much, and my grandmother explained. “He grew into a leader, but he wasn’t *born* one. It didn’t come naturally to him. Not like it does for you. That’s a superpower, Joey. And you need to always use that power for good.”

She went on to talk about advocacy and activism, and her work for women’s suffrage when she was young, and how much still needed to be done for women and minorities.

“I can see you in that fight for equality,” she said. “And maybe it all starts here. Defending Charlie. Will you do that for me? For him?”

I sat up straighter and promised her I would.

In the weeks that followed, I put the kibosh on all bullying of Charlie, and I did it in grand style. Rather than simply defending him on an ad hoc basis, I befriended him, and he was damn near popular by the end of that school year. I know that probably sounds arrogant, but it’s the truth. I was pretty pleased with myself.