

bestselling author of HIDDEN PICTURES



~~THE LAST ONE~~

~~AT THE~~

~~WEDDING~~

a novel

~~JASON~~

~~REKULAK~~

**THE
LAST ONE
AT THE
WEDDING**

A Novel

JASON REKULAK



FLATIRON
BOOKS
NEW YORK

[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

**Thank you for buying this
Flatiron Books ebook.**

To receive special offers, bonus content,
and info on new releases and other great reads,
sign up for our newsletters.

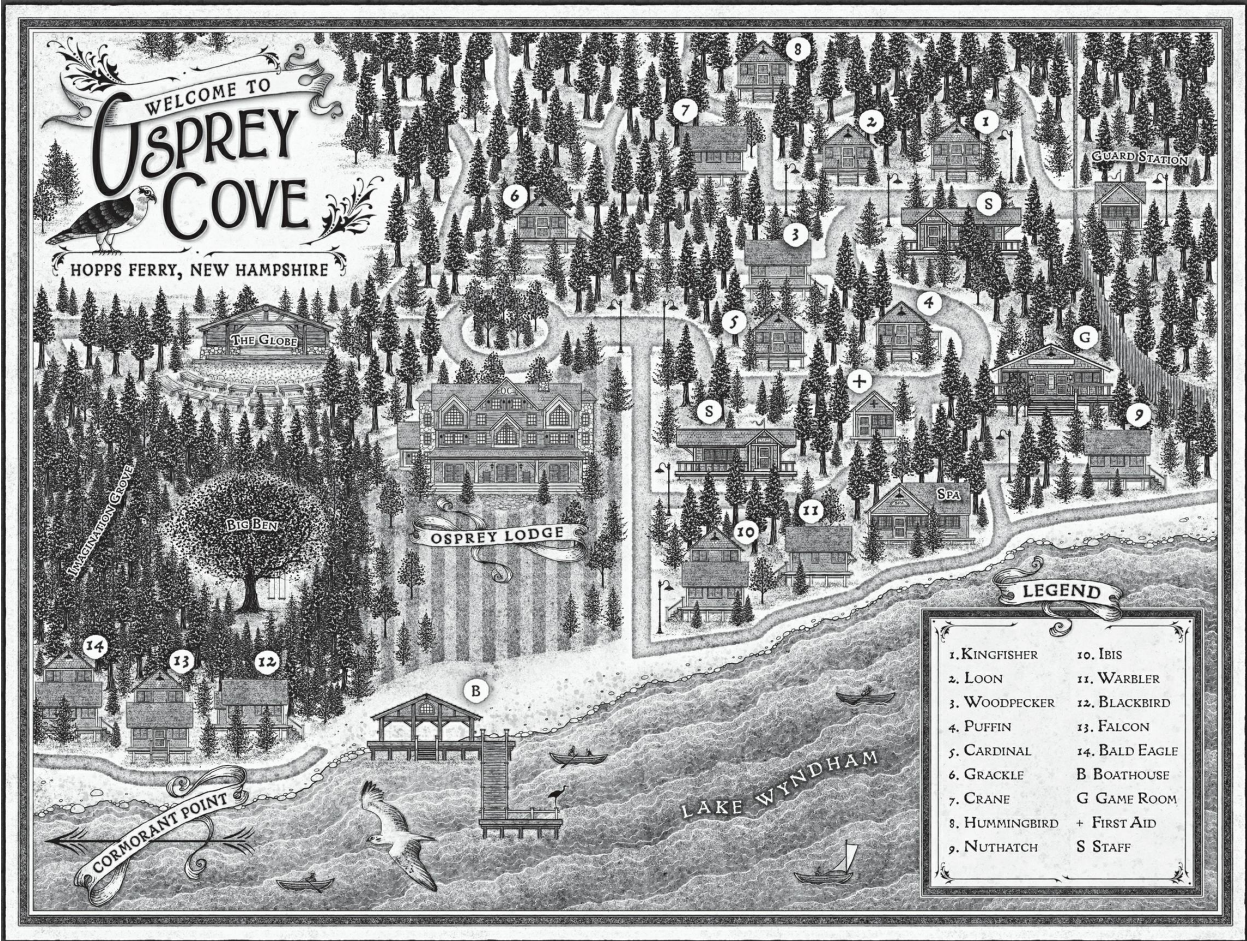
[Sign Up](#)

Or visit us online at
us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup

For email updates on the author, click [here](#).

The author and publisher have provided this e-book to you for your personal use only. You may not make this e-book publicly available in any way. **Copyright infringement is against the law. If you believe the copy of this e-book you are reading infringes on the author's copyright, please notify the publisher at: us.macmillanusa.com/piracy.**

For great teachers everywhere—especially Ed Logue, John Balaban, Charlotte Holmes, Robert C. S. Downs, Shelby Hearon, T. R. Smith, and Charles Cantalupo



WELCOME TO
OSPREY COVE

HOPPS FERRY, NEW HAMPSHIRE

LEGEND

- | | |
|----------------|----------------|
| 1. KINGFISHER | 10. IBIS |
| 2. LOON | 11. WARBLER |
| 3. WOODPECKER | 12. BLACKBIRD |
| 4. PUFFIN | 13. FALCON |
| 5. CARDINAL | 14. BALD EAGLE |
| 6. GRACKLE | B BOATHOUSE |
| 7. CRANE | G GAME ROOM |
| 8. HUMMINGBIRD | + FIRST AID |
| 9. NUTHATCH | S STAFF |

I.

THE INVITATION



1.

My phone lit up with the words UNKNOWN CALLER, which usually meant some kind of scam, but I guess I felt like talking because I answered anyway: “Hello?”

“Dad?”

I shot up so fast my knees banged against the kitchen table, sloshing coffee all over my bacon and eggs. “Maggie? Is that you?”

She answered but I couldn’t make out the words. Her voice was faint. The line hissed and crackled, like I was gonna lose her at any moment.

“Hang on, hon. I can barely hear you.”

The kitchen is the worst room in my house for taking calls. You never get more than a bar or two of signal strength. I carried the phone into my living room and tripped over some lumber I’d been trimming and sanding and staining. Just a little carpentry project to kill the time at night; it would all turn into a coffee table, eventually. But I could never motivate myself to finish the job, so there were screws and sawdust all over my rug.

I hopscotched through the mess and rushed down the hall to Maggie’s childhood bedroom. She had a tiny window overlooking our backyard and the old Lackawanna rail lines—and when I leaned against the glass, the signal popped up to three bars.

“Maggie? Is this better?”

“Hello?” She still sounded a million miles away. Like she was calling from overseas. Or from a cabin deep in a remote wilderness. Or from the trunk of an abandoned car, buried at the bottom of an underground garage. “Dad, can you hear me?”

“Are you okay?”

“Dad? Hello? Can you hear me?”

I mashed the phone to my ear and shouted yes, YES, I could hear her. “Where are you? Do you need help?”

And the line went dead.

CALL FAILED.

Our first conversation in three years, and it hadn’t lasted even a minute.

2.

But now I had her number. Now I finally, *finally* had a way to reach her. I pressed CALL BACK and got a busy signal. I tried again, two-three-four times: busy-busy-busy. Because *she* was calling *me*. I was so excited, my hands were shaking. I forced myself to stop dialing and waited for the phone to ring. I sat at the foot of the bed and glanced impatiently around my daughter's bedroom.

All her old stuff was still here. I never had houseguests, never had any reason to get rid of it. All her posters from high school were still taped up: One Direction and the Jonas Brothers and a goofy grinning sloth hanging from a tree. There was a big shelf of sports trophies and a wicker basket filled with stuffed animals. Most days I kept the door closed and tried to ignore the room's existence. But every so often (more than I care to admit) I'd come inside and sit on her giant beanbag chair and let myself remember when we were all still here and still acting like a family. I'd remember how Colleen and I used to squeeze into the little twin bed and Maggie would plop between us and we'd laugh ourselves silly reading *Good Night, Gorilla*.

My phone buzzed again.

The same UNKNOWN CALLER.

"Dad? Is this better?"

Now her voice was clear. Now she could have been sitting right beside me, changed into her *Lion King* pajamas and ready for bed.

"Maggie, are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Dad. Everything's fine."

"Where are you?"

"I'm home. I mean, my apartment. In Boston. And everything is fine."

I waited for her to continue, but she didn't say anything. Maybe she didn't know where to start. And neither did I, really. How many times had I imagined this moment? How many times had I rehearsed this conversation while standing in the shower? Now it was finally happening, and all I could think to blurt out was: "Did you get my cards?"

Because God I sent this kid so many cards: birthday cards, Halloween cards, just-because cards. Always with ten or twenty dollars of pocket money and a little note.

"I got them," she said. "I've been meaning to call for a while now, actually."

"I'm so sorry, Maggie. This whole situation—"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Okay. All right." I felt like one of those hostage negotiators on *Rescue 911*. My number one objective was keeping Maggie on the phone, keeping her talking, so I pivoted to a safer topic:

“Are you still at Capaciti?”

“Yeah, I just had my three-year anniversary.”

Maggie was so damn proud of that job. She was hired by Capaciti right around the time our troubles started—and long before anyone had ever heard of the place. Back then it was just one of a thousand Cambridge start-ups promising to change the world with a new top secret technology. Now they have eight hundred employees spread across three continents, and they’d just run a Super Bowl commercial with George Clooney and Matt Damon. I read everything I could find about the company, always searching for a glimpse of my daughter’s name, or at least some insights into her life and career.

“Those new Chevys look amazing,” I told her. “As soon as the prices come down—”

She cut me off midsentence: “Dad, I’ve got some news. I’m getting married.”

She didn’t pause to let the information sink in. She just started spilling the details like she couldn’t hold them back anymore. Her fiancé’s name was Aidan. He was twenty-six years old. His family was hosting the reception at their home in New Hampshire. And all the while I was stuck on the first bombshell.

She was getting married?

“... And in spite of everything that’s happened,” Maggie continued, “I’d really like you to be there.”

3.

My name is Frank Szatowski and I am fifty-two years old. I've spent most of my adult life driving a package car for the United Parcel Service. You know those big brown trucks rumbling around your neighborhood full of goodies from the internet? UPS calls them package cars, even though they're technically large step vans. I started driving young, straight out of the army, and I was recently inducted into the Circle of Honor, an elite group of UPS drivers who've worked twenty-five years without an accident.

I make a decent living and I've always liked the work, even though it keeps getting harder and harder. When I started, back in the late nineties, most of the parcels were still boxes. The heaviest thing you'd lift might be a Gateway computer. These days, forget it. Any given shift, we're hauling futons, file cabinets, artificial Christmas trees, flat-screens, even Ping-Pong tables. And car tires, holy mother of God, those are the worst. Did you know you can buy car tires online? They ship in packs of four, strapped together and bundled in cardboard, so we can't even roll the damn things.

Still, if I pulled enough overtime, I could usually clear a hundred grand. My Jeep was all paid off; my mortgage was close, and I didn't owe a penny to Visa or Mastercard. I was three years away from early retirement with a decent pension and comprehensive healthcare. Not bad for a guy who never went to college, right? Up until my wife passed, and all my troubles with Maggie started, I used to say I was blessed. I used to feel like the luckiest bastard on earth.

So now listen to what happened:

"The wedding's in three months," Maggie told me. "July twenty-third. I know I'm calling super last-minute but—"

"I'll be there," I said, and my voice cracked because I was starting to cry. "Of course I'll be there."

"Okay, good. Because we're mailing the invites tomorrow and—I wanted to call first."

And then the conversation sputtered out. Like she was expecting me to say something, but I was too choked up to answer. I made a fist and thumped my breastbone, three hard whacks to keep myself from blubbering. *Come on, Frankie. Keep it together! Don't be such a baby!*

"Dad? Are you still there?"

"Tell me about Aidan," I suggested. "My future son-in-law. Where did you meet him?"

"At a costume party. Back on Halloween. I went as Pam, from *The Office*? And Aidan came as Jim. So as soon as he showed up, everyone wanted us to stand together. We started doing scenes from the show, and his impression was totally spot-on."

I had trouble focusing on her story because I was too busy doing the math. "You met *last*

Halloween? Six months ago?”

“But it feels like I’ve known him forever. Sometimes we’re talking and I swear he can read my mind. Like we have a telepathic connection. Did you and Mom ever feel that way?”

“Sure, I guess? When we first met?” But then we got older and wiser and realized these were just signs of youthful infatuation. I didn’t bother pointing this out. I loved hearing the happiness in Maggie’s voice, the sweet music of hope and optimism.

“What’s Aidan do for a living?”

“He’s a painter.”

“In the union?”

“No, not a housepainter. He makes art.”

I was determined to sound supportive, but you have to admit this was a curveball.

“He makes art for a living?”

“Well, he has a couple things in galleries? But right now he’s building up his name. Growing his reputation. That’s how it works. Plus he teaches a class, at MassArt.”

“What does he get for that?”

“I’m sorry?”

“How much does he make?”

“I’m not going to tell you.”

I couldn’t understand why not, but I heard her taking a deep breath and getting annoyed so I decided not to push it. Maybe Maggie was right. Maybe her future artist-husband’s salary was none of my business. Besides, I still had plenty of other questions:

“First marriage?”

“Yes.”

“Any kids?”

“Zero kids and zero debt, don’t worry.”

“What about his mother?”

“I love her. She’s got some health issues right now? Lots of migraines. But she’s started a new medicine and it’s really helping.”

“And his dad?”

“Fantastic. Amazing.”

“What’s he do?”

Maggie hesitated. “That part’s a little complicated.”

“How is it complicated?”

“It’s not *complicated*. It’s just more of a conversation than I want to have right now.”

What the hell was that supposed to mean?

“It’s a straightforward question, Maggie. How does he make a living?”

“The headline is: I’m getting married and I want you to come to the wedding. July twenty-third in New Hampshire.”

“But you can’t tell me what his father does?”

“I could tell you, but you’ll have more questions and I need to go. I have a dress fitting at ten and the seamstress is a total psycho. If I’m a single minute late, she’ll make me reschedule the whole appointment.”

Clearly she just wanted to get off the phone, but I couldn’t resist making one more push: “Is

Aidan's father in jail?"

"No, it's nothing bad."

"Is he famous? Is he an actor?"

"He's not an actor."

"But he's famous?"

"I told you: I don't want to get into it."

"Just give me his name, Maggie. I'll google him."

The line seemed to go dead for a moment. Like the call had been dropped, or perhaps she'd muted the phone to confer with someone. And then she was back.

"I think we should talk about it over dinner. Me and you and Aidan. Could you maybe drive up to Boston?"

And of course I could drive up to Boston. I could drive all the way to the North Pole, if that was what Maggie wanted. She suggested Saturday night at seven o'clock, and she gave me the name of an Irish pub on Fleet Street, near the Old State House. Then she insisted she had to end the conversation and get to her dress fitting. "I'll see you this weekend. I'm really looking forward to it."

I said, "Me, too," but I couldn't end the call without one more attempt at an apology: "And listen, Maggie, I am so sorry for everything, okay? I've felt so awful these past few years. I know I screwed up. I should have handled things better, and I wish—"

And then I was interrupted by a soft click.

She'd already hung up.

4.

My wife died from a brain aneurysm, one of these ticking time bomb things. Colleen used to work at Michaels, the arts and crafts store. One minute she's helping a schoolteacher look for glitter glue. Next thing you know, she's down on the floor, lights out. Died in the ambulance on the way to Holy Redeemer. Thirty-six years old. A tragedy on multiple levels, when you consider all the awful stuff I'm going to tell you about. Because my wife could spot a bullshitter from a mile away. She would have seen this trouble coming long before I did.

Maggie was only ten years old when her mother passed. Right on the cusp of puberty and womanhood and at pretty much the worst age to lose a parent. I remember wishing that I had gotten the aneurysm instead of Colleen, because my wife could have raised Maggie just fine and my Teamsters pension would have provided for them. Instead I had to make do with help from my sister, Tammy. She lived six miles away and gave me a ton of help; she was always driving Maggie to doctors' appointments and dentist visits and contact lens fittings and ob-gyn screenings and dermatology checkups and a million other things so I could pay the bills and keep food on our table. It was a stressful time of life, and I am first to admit that I made a shit ton of mistakes. You know you've messed up pretty bad when your only daughter stops speaking to you, when she gives you the silent treatment for three whole years. But I'll talk about that whole situation later. Before I tell you the story of Maggie's previous so-called boyfriend, I want to tell you about her new fiancé, and why I was instantly suspicious.

The day after her big surprise announcement, Maggie called me back with a change of plans: "We think you should come to our apartment instead. We'll just eat here."

She hadn't mentioned that she and Aidan were already living together, but I wasn't too surprised. Boston rents were brutally expensive, and Aidan probably saved a fortune by gaining a roommate. Plus, Maggie always hated her old apartment, anyway. It was a tiny, damp studio in the basement of a Victorian brownstone, and the place was overrun with silverfish—long hairy insects that looked like giant eyebrows. They fell into Maggie's bathtub every time she took a shower, and she'd have to tap-dance around their bloated drowning bodies. My daughter claimed to spend all her weekends in the Capaciti offices just to steer clear of the dank, damp apartment. I'm sure she was thrilled to break her lease and move to Aidan's place.

But I pushed to meet at a restaurant, anyway. "This is a special occasion. I don't want you to cook."

"I'm not cooking."

"Aidan's cooking?"

"We worked it out, Dad. You just need to show up."

I thought I understood what was happening. I figured that with a big wedding on the horizon, the kids were looking at their checkbooks and cutting expenses. I'd already googled "How much do they pay art teachers?" and let me tell you something, it is not good. The median salary was forty grand, and that won't go far in a city like Boston. Forty grand won't get you more than a couple of cans of baked beans.

I assured Maggie that I wanted to pay for the entire meal at the restaurant of their choice. "Chinese, Italian, anything you want. Let's splurge."

But she insisted I come to their apartment. "It's right off Route 93. By the Zakim Bridge."

"You live next to a bridge?"

"Not literally next to it. But you can see it from our window."

"And it's safe there? My Jeep will be okay?"

"It'll be fine, Dad. Aidan's lived here three years and he's never had any problems."

She seemed to think my questions were silly, but let's be honest: these days, you can't turn on the radio without hearing about another homicide or carjacking or random bursts of gunfire. And "right off Route 93" didn't sound like the best of neighborhoods. That highway was choked with traffic all day long and no one with any money would choose to live near it.

Still, I kept these concerns to myself and asked Maggie to text me the address. I was keeping an open mind. I was ready to meet my daughter anywhere.

5.

Apart from a four-year stint in the United States Army, I've lived my whole life in Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, a small borough of six thousand people in the Pocono Mountains. We're popular with tourists because we've got skiing, swimming, horseback riding, and miles of hiking trails, plus a nice downtown with restaurants and shops. In the winter, we dress it all up with twinkle lights and it looks like a Lifetime Christmas movie. March brings the annual St. Patty's Day parade with fire trucks and bagpipes and the high school marching band. And every July we have Stroudfest, which is a giant outdoor music festival with live bands and dancing in the streets. I'm not trying to suggest we're any kind of world-class travel destination—I know Wolfgang Puck won't be opening a restaurant here anytime soon—but Stroudsburg is clean and affordable, and the schools are pretty good. You keep hearing about all these other small towns going broke, but somehow we're still getting by.

Boston was a long drive from home and I left early, anxious to get on the road. Halfway through Connecticut, I started seeing billboards for the new Chrysler Reactor and the Miracle Battery, which is the product that put Capaciti on the map. It's got the best range of any EV sold in the United States—well over eight hundred miles on a single charge, even with the music loud and the AC blasting. Every billboard had the same slogan—THE FUTURE OF DRIVING IS CLEAN—and I felt a little shiver of pride whenever I passed one. Because Maggie worked in the marketing department and I liked to believe that she'd helped with the signs, or at least knew the people who did. All these giant expensive advertisements seen by millions of drivers every day, and my daughter had played a part in them. I wished her mother was alive to see it.

A little after two o'clock I stopped in Worcester, about an hour west of Boston, to look around for a cheap hotel. There was a Super 8 right off the highway advertising vacancies for sixty-nine dollars and the manager was happy to grant me an early check-in, so I didn't bother to shop around. The room was on the shabby side, with water stains on the ceiling and cigarette burns on the furniture, but the mattress was firm and the bathroom was clean so I felt like I got a good deal.

On my way into the city, I stopped at a Sam's Club to pick up some flowers. They always have these nice little bouquets right by the registers. And then once I got in the store I had to buy Pepperidge Farm Milano cookies, because they were always Maggie's favorite. And two small fire extinguishers because they were on sale for ten dollars and you can always use some extras.

Were all these gifts a little excessive? Maybe. But I still remembered what it was like to be young and starting out, and I thought Maggie and Aidan would appreciate the help.

By six o'clock I'd made it to the Charles River and found myself snarled in Boston gridlock.

It was a long, painful crawl over the Zakim Bridge, but traffic got better on the other side. I took the first exit and then followed the river for a mile or so until the road dead-ended at an enormous tower of steel and glass: Beacon Plaza. The GPS said I'd arrived at my destination, but I knew right away there'd been a mistake. It looked like the skyscraper in *Die Hard*. My headlights pointed at a sign listing all the major tenants: Accenture, Liberty Mutual, Santander Bank, and a bunch of names that sounded like law firms. It was Saturday night, so most of the floors were dark. But I saw a woman through the windows of the lobby, so I left my Jeep in a loading zone and went inside to ask for directions.

I felt like I was entering a cathedral—a vast cavernous space built of glass and polished stone. On a normal day, I imagined that thousands of commuters passed through this lobby on their way to work. But now it was just me and a lone young woman in the center of the room, standing at a high desk that resembled an altar.

“Mr. Szatowski?” she asked.

I couldn't believe it. “How do you know my name?”

“Margaret told us you were coming. I just need a quick peek at a photo ID, sir. A driver's license will be fine.”

She was blond and petite and very pretty, dressed in a trim blue suit. I reached for my wallet, a worn leather billfold frayed at the seams, on the verge of falling apart. “This is an apartment building?”

“It's mixed use. Mostly commercial. But the top floors, where Aidan and Margaret live, they're all residential.”

I offered my Pennsylvania driver's license, and Olivia (up close I could see her name tag) handled it with tremendous reverence. Like I'd just shared an original parchment copy of the Declaration of Independence. “Thank you, Mr. Szatowski. Elevator D is to your right, and that'll take you upstairs.”

“My car's in the loading zone,” I explained. “Is there—”

A young man materialized on my left, as if conjured out of thin air. “I'll take care of your vehicle, Mr. Szatowski. There's a garage beneath the building.”

I didn't know what was more incredible—that everyone in the lobby already knew my name, or that they were all pronouncing it flawlessly. If you've got any Polish blood, you know the *s* is silent and it's pronounced *Zuh-TOW-skee*. But your average person tries to pronounce the *s* anyway. They call me Mr. *Sizza-TOO-skee* or worse. You would not believe all the different ways people butcher it.

He held out his hand, requesting the keys—but I still had all my gifts waiting in the Jeep, so I followed him outside to retrieve them. The young man gave me a paper tag with his phone number, and he instructed me to call it when I was ready to leave, so he could have the vehicle waiting for me. I reached into my wallet for a dollar and tried to give it to him, but he backed away like my money was radioactive.

“It's my pleasure, sir. Enjoy your evening.”

I returned to the lobby and Olivia welcomed me back with another heart-melting smile. I didn't know what this woman was doing stuck behind a reception desk on a Saturday night. She could have been cheerleading for the NFL or modeling for Victoria's Secret. “Enjoy your evening, sir.”

“Thank you.”

I stepped aboard elevator D, a narrow black box with sleek metal walls. It was my first time in an elevator without buttons—there was no control panel, so I couldn’t discern how to make it “go.” Then the doors slid closed and the elevator started going anyway, seemingly of its own free will. Above the doors, a small screen flickered to life and tallied the numbers of the passing floors: 2–3–5–10–20–30–PH1–PH2–PH3. Then the elevator slowed to a stop and the door parted and there was Maggie with the setting sun at her back, dressed in a black turtleneck and black pants, holding a long-stemmed glass of white wine and standing on top of the world.

“Dad!”

Was this a mirage? I’d expected to arrive in a hallway of numbered doors and potted plants. Instead I had teleported right into someone’s living room, bright and lavishly furnished with giant glass walls overlooking the city skyline. It felt dizzying and disorienting and also a tiny bit fake, like I’d arrived on the set of a TV show.

“Where’s the apartment?”

She laughed. “This *is* the apartment.”

“You live here?”

“Since February. After we got engaged, Aidan invited me to move in.” The elevator door started to close and she blocked it with her hand. “Come on, Dad. You need to step off.”

I took a careful step forward, disoriented, not completely sure the floor would support me. I almost didn’t recognize my daughter. As a little girl, Maggie was what people used to call a tomboy. She favored overalls, sports jerseys, and flannel shirts from my closet, knotted at the waist so they didn’t flap around. But then in high school she veered hard in the opposite direction, pivoting to swishy skirts and floral sundresses and crazy thrift-store discoveries. Now she’d adopted another new look, and this one was pure Cambridge Ivy League—smart and chic, urban and sophisticated. She’d grown out her hair—it fell halfway down her back, fuller with more layers, like she’d invested real money in it. And there was a light in her eyes that I hadn’t seen since childhood. She looked like a Disney princess ready to burst into song. Or to put it more simply: my daughter looked head over heels in love.

“Maggie, you look amazing.”

She waved off the compliment. “Aw, come on.”

“I’m serious! What did you do to yourself?”

“It’s just the lighting in the apartment. This building makes everyone look like a supermodel. Let me give you a hug.”

She put her arms around my waist and pressed her face to my chest, and I was so happy I thought I might start to cry. Because this kid used to hug me every day. When she was six years old, we used to play this game called Hug Monster where she’d crawl around on the rug, snarling and growling and biting my ankles, and the only thing that would turn her back into a little girl was a monster hug that swooped her off the floor, arms and legs flailing. I probably hadn’t thought about the game in ten years, but the memory came bubbling up out of nowhere.

“I’m glad you’re here,” she said, speaking softly into my shoulder. “Thank you for coming.”

And I could feel myself getting choked up again. I worried that if I said anything, my voice would break and I’d start blubbering like a big baby. So I just broke away and gave her my bag of gifts. She seemed confused by the fire extinguishers but clearly loved the flowers.

“They’re beautiful,” she said. “Let’s get them in water.”

I’d never entered an apartment through an elevator so I needed a minute to orient myself and get my bearings. The “living room” was just one part of a sprawling open floor plan that wrapped the corner of the tower. The exterior walls were all glass and offered a panoramic view of the city skyline. And the interior walls were covered with faces—men and women of all different ages, all photographed in black and white and staring at the viewer. None of these people would ever be mistaken for supermodels, because their faces had too many flaws: wrinkles and blotches and drooping eyelids, crooked teeth and thinning hair and pointy chins. In other words, they looked like regular everyday people, the kind you’d see shopping for groceries or riding the bus after work.

“These are Aidan’s,” Maggie said proudly. I looked closer and realized that each photograph was actually a painting, expertly rendered in black and white and shades of silver and gray. “He’s sold a couple but these are his favorites so we’re hanging on to them. What do you think?”

I thought they were a little creepy, if I’m being honest. All these faces staring out with their cold expressions, looking like they’d been photographed against their will. But then again, if a couple of creepy faces paid the rent for a luxury penthouse apartment, I bet I could learn to live with them. “They’re incredible, Maggie. He’s very talented.”

She led me around a corner, through a formal dining area, and into a very modern chef’s kitchen with two sinks, marble countertops, stainless steel appliances, and lots of tiny computer screens. A short, dark-haired woman stood over the range, stirring a saucepan, but she interrupted her work to welcome me. “Hello, Mr. Szatowski. I’m Lucia.”

“Please, call me Frank. It’s great to meet you.”

“Lucia’s an amazing cook,” Maggie said. “I’ve learned so much from watching her.”

Lucia blushed easily—she was still fairly young—and I couldn’t figure out how she was related to the family.

“Are you Aidan’s sister?”

She blushed even more, like I’d paid her a compliment. “Oh, no, I just have the pleasure of cooking for you all tonight.”

Maggie explained that Lucia trained at Cariño, one of the few restaurants in Boston to receive a prestigious Michelin star, and now she’d launched a new career as a private chef, preparing meals for guests in the privacy of their homes. And only then did I understand that Aidan had hired this woman to make our dinner.

“May I bring you something to drink? We have beer, wine, cocktails, sparkling water—”

“Whatever’s easiest,” I told her.

Lucia smiled patiently, not quite sure how to proceed, and I realized I was making her job harder.

“How about a beer?” Maggie suggested.

“Perfect,” I said.

Lucia encouraged us to make ourselves comfortable; she said she would care for the flowers and bring the beer in a minute. Maggie steered me back to the living room and suggested we wait for Aidan outside, on the patio. “He’s stuck in traffic, but he’ll be home soon.”

One of the big windows facing the skyline was actually a door, and with the slightest touch from Maggie’s hand it slid sideways, creating an opening that we stepped through. Like the

apartment itself, the patio wrapped around the corner of the building, and it was outfitted with all kinds of lounges, sofas, tables, and firepits. But of course my eyes went right to the view. I'd never seen the city from such spectacular heights. It was a whole new way of looking at Boston, a God's-eye view of Fenway Park, Faneuil Hall, the three-masted ships docked in the harbor; I could see everything laid out before me like a miniature model.

"Jesus, Maggie," I said. "You didn't tell me Aidan was—" I stopped short of using the word *rich*. I didn't want to jump to conclusions. "What kind of rent are you paying?"

"Aidan thinks rent is a waste of money. He bought the unit as an investment property."

"How does a twenty-six-year-old art teacher get an investment property?"

"Well, see, this is why I wanted to meet in person. Aidan's last name is Gardner. His father's Errol Gardner. Do you know who that is?"

I'd spent the last three years reading everything I could find about Capaciti, so of course I knew all about Errol Gardner. He was the man behind the Miracle Battery, the company's CEO and "Chief Miracle Worker." In the past year alone, he'd been profiled in the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Washington Post*, and he'd even visited the White House as a guest of President Biden. Maybe he didn't have the name recognition of a Jeff Bezos or an Elon Musk—but to anyone watching the American auto industry, Errol Gardner was a big deal.

"You're marrying Errol Gardner's son?"

"You're going to love him. He's really down-to-earth."

"Errol? Or his son?"

She laughed. "Both! They're both terrific."

I gripped the handrail to steady myself. Up until this moment, I'd thought I had a clear understanding of Maggie's future. I imagined she would face the traditional climb up the corporate ladder while juggling day care, childcare, homework, carpools, dance lessons, sports practice, and endless bills, bills, bills. I figured I'd help Maggie and Aidan as much as I could; I'd mail them an extra hundred bucks now and then, just to pitch in. But now here I was, forty stories above the Charles River, seeing her future from a brand-new perspective. I felt like I was standing on Mars, a hundred million miles from home.

"This is incredible, Maggie. Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

She gestured at the skyline, at its hundreds of high-rises and thousands of people and all the tiny blinking lights. "It's hard to describe this over the phone. You need to see it firsthand."

I thought back to her previous apartment, the dank clammy basement studio with the bathtub full of silverfish. "It's a nice change from that dump on Talmadge Street."

I only meant it as a joke, but something about the remark made her uncomfortable.

"It wasn't a dump. Just a little small."

"You hated it," I reminded her. "You called it a prison cell."

"I was just being dramatic," she said with a shrug. "It wasn't that bad."

Lucia brought me a frosted pint glass full of beer and then vanished as fast as she'd arrived. Maggie raised her white wine in a toast.

"To new beginnings," she said.

We clinked glasses and drank, and I couldn't hold back my apologies any longer. "I'm so glad you called me, Maggie. All those problems we had—I want you to know, I take the blame for everything."