

Special Free Preview

**Beautiful Day**

Jennifer Bailey Carmichael and Stuart James Graham, along with their families, invite you to share in the celebration of their wedding.

Saturday, July 10, 2013, 4:00 pm

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Fair Street

Nantucket Island

Reception to follow at the Carmichael home, 34 Orange Street

RSVP June 1.

## The Notebook: Page 1

*Dear Jenna,*

*I have finally reached the point with my prognosis where I accept that there are certain things I will not live to see. I will not see the day your father retires from the law firm (he always promised me he would retire on his 65th birthday, safe to say that promise was only made to appease me); I will not live to see my grandchildren ride roller coasters, get pimples, or go on dates -- and I will not live to see you get married.*

*This last item pains me the most. As I write this, you are a senior in college and you have just broken up with Jason. For my sake, you are pretending like it's no big deal, you said you knew he wasn't "the One"; his favorite politician is Pat Buchanan and yours is Ralph Nader. So it won't be Jason you end up with -- dishy though he was (sorry, true) -- but there will be someone, someday, who will light you up. You will get married, and you have said that you would like a big, traditional wedding with all the bells and whistles. Since you've been a little girl you've had your heart set on getting married on Nantucket, and although marriage is probably further from your mind now than it was when you were six, I hope that is still true.*

*That's where this notebook comes in. I won't be here to encourage or guide you when the time comes; I will, sweet Jenna, probably never meet the man you're going to marry (unless it's the delivery man from FTD who has been here three times this week. I can tell he has a crush on you.) My hand actually aches knowing that it will not be squeezing your hand just before you walk down the aisle.*

*But enough feeling sorry for ourselves! I will, in these pages, endeavor to bestow my best advice for your big day. You can follow it or ignore it, but at the very least you will know where I weigh in on each and every matter.*

*I wish for you a beautiful day, Jenna, my darling. You alone will make it so.*

*Love, Mom*

## OUTTAKES

**Finn Sullivan-Walker (Bridesmaid):** I can't wait to see Jenna wearing her mother's gown. It's vintage Priscilla of Boston, silk bodice with a sweetheart neckline and lace column skirt. There used to be a picture in the Carmichael house of Jenna's mother, Beth, wearing the dress. I was obsessed with that picture when I was younger, even before Beth died. Seeing Jenna in that dress is going to be surreal, you know? Like seeing a ghost.

**Douglas Carmichael (Father of bride):** I can't stand the thought of giving Jenna away. She's my last one. Well, I guess technically Nick is my last one, but Nick might never get married.

**Nick Carmichael (Brother of bride):** My sister has extremely hot friends.

**Margot (Sister of bride, Maid of Honor):** Can I be honest? I really just want this weekend to be over.

## Thursday

**Margot**

Jenna looked so happy.

They were on the ferry, the hulking white Steamship which was properly named "the Eagle," but which Margot had always thought of as *Moby Dick*, because that was what their mother used to call it. Every year when the Carmichael family drove their Ford Country Squire into the darkened hold of the boat, Beth used to say it was like being swallowed by a whale. She had found the ride on the Steamship romantic, literary, and possibly also Biblical (she would have been thinking of Jonah, right?) -- but Margot had despised the ferry ride then, and she despised it even more now. The thick, swirling fumes from the engines made her queasy, as did the lurching motion. For this trip, Margot had taken the Dramamine that Jenna offered her in Hyannis. Really, with the seven thousand details of her wedding to triage, the fact that Jenna had remembered to pack pills for her sister's seasickness was astonishing -- but that was Jenna for you. She was thoughtful, nearly to a fault. She was, Margot thought with no small amount of envy, exactly like their mother.

Margot pretended the Dramamine was working for Jenna's sake. She pulled down the brim of her straw hat against the hot July sun, which was blinding when reflected off the surface of the water. The last thing she wanted was to freckle right before the wedding. They were outside, on the upper deck. Jenna and her best friend, Finn Sullivan-Walker, were posing against the railing at the bow of the boat. Nantucket was just a smudge on the horizon; even Christopher Columbus might not have said for sure there was land ahead, but Jenna was adamant that Margot take a picture of her and Finn, with their blond hair billowing around their faces, as soon as Nantucket was visible in the background.

Margot planted her feet at shoulder-width to steady herself against the gentle and yet nefarious rocking of the boat, and raised the camera. Her sister looked happy. She looked excited-happy that this was the beginning of her wedding weekend which was certain to be the most fun-filled and memorable weekend of her life (!!!) -- and she also looked contented happy, because she was confident that marrying Stuart James Graham was her life's mission. Stuart was the One.

Stuart had proposed to Jenna on a park bench across the street from Little Minds, the progressive, "sustainable" pre-school where Jenna was the lead teacher, presenting her with a ring featuring Ceylon sapphires and ethically-mined diamonds from Canada. (Stuart was a banker, who made money buying and selling money, but he knew the path to Jenna's heart.) Since that day, Margot had cast herself as Devil's Advocate to Jenna's vision of a lifetime of happiness with Stuart. Marriage was the worst idea in all of civilization, Margot said. For two people to meet when they were young and decide to spend the rest of their lives together was unnatural, Margot said, because everyone knew that human beings changed as they got older and what were the chances -- honestly, *what* were the *chances* -- that two people would evolve in ways that were compatible?

"Listen, " Margot had said one evening when it was just her and Jenna having drinks at Cafe Gitane in Soho. "You like having sex with Stuart now. But imagine doing it four thousand times. You'll lose interest, I promise you. You'll grow sick of it. And the enthusiasm that you used to have for having sex with Stuart will migrate -- against your will -- to something else. You'll develop an unhealthy interest in cultivating orchids. You'll be *that* mother on the baseball field, harassing the umpire over every pitch that crosses the plate. You'll start flirting with the cashier at Whole Foods, or the compost guru at the local nursery, and the flirting will turn into fantasies and the fantasies will become a fling, then perhaps a full-blown affair, and Stuart will find out by checking your cell phone records, and your life will be ruined, your reputation will end up in shreds and your children will require expensive therapy." Margot paused to sip her sauvignon blanc. "Don't get married."

Jenna had stared at her levelly. Or almost. Margot thought that this time, maybe, somewhere deep inside those clear blue eyes, she detected a flicker of worry.

"Shut up," Jenna said. "You're just saying that because you're divorced."

"Everyone is divorced," Margot said. "We owe our very livelihood to the fact that *everyone is divorced*. It put food on the table, it paid for our orthodonture, it sent us to college." Margot paused again, more wine. She was under the gun to get her point across. It was nearly seven o'clock and her children

were in the apartment without a babysitter. At twelve years old, Drum Jr. was okay to be left in charge until it got dark, then he would panic and start blowing up Margot's phone. "Divorce, Jenna, is paying for your wedding."

Margot was referring to the fact that their father, Douglas Carmichael, was the managing partner at Garrett, Parker, and Spence, a very successful family law practice in midtown Manhattan. Technically, Margot knew, Jenna would have to agree with her: Divorce had always paid for everything.

"There is no man on earth better suited for me than Stuart," Jenna said. "He traded in his Range Rover for a hybrid for me. He and two of the guys on his trading desk showed up last weekend to fix a hole in the roof at Little Minds. He brings me coffee in bed every morning when he stays over. He goes with me to foreign films and talks with me about them afterwards at the fondue place. He likes the fondue place and doesn't mind that I always want to eat there after the movies. He doesn't complain when I listen to Taylor Swift at top volume. Sometimes, he even sings along."

This was a litany Margot had heard many times before. Famously, after only three dates, Stuart showed up at Jenna's apartment with a bouquet of yellow roses and a screwdriver, and he had fixed the towel bar in her bathroom, which had been broken since she'd moved in two years earlier.

"What I'm saying is that you and Stuart are tra-la-la now, everything is sunshine and lollipops, but it might still fail down the road."

"Shut up," Jenna said again. "Just shut the eff up. You're not going to talk me out of it. I love Stuart."

"Love dies," Margot said, and she snatched up the bill.

Now, Margot tried to center Jenna and Finn's shining faces in the viewfinder. She snapped a picture, all hair and toothy smiles.

"Take another one, just in case," Jenna said.

Margot took another as the boat pitched side...to...side. She grabbed one of the plastic molded chairs that were bolted to the deck. Oh God. She breathed in through her nose, out through her mouth. It was good to be gazing at the horizon. Her three children were down in the hold of the ship, sitting in the car, playing Angry Birds and Fruit Ninja on their iDevices. The movement of the boat didn't faze them; all three had their father's ironclad constitution. Nothing made them sick; physically, they were warriors. But Drum Jr. was afraid of the dark, and Carson, Margot's ten-year-old, had nearly failed the fourth grade. At the end of the year his teacher, Ms. Wolff, had told Margot -- as if she didn't know already -- that Carson wasn't stupid, he was just lazy.

Like his father. Drum Sr. was living in San Diego, surfing and managing a fish taco stand. He hoped to buy the stand and possibly turn it into a franchise; someday, he would be a baron of fish taco stands up and down the coast of California. The business plan sounded hazy to Margot, but she encouraged him nonetheless. When she met him, Drum Sr. had had a trust fund, which he'd frittered away on exotic surfing and skiing trips. His parents had bought Drum and Margot a palatial apartment on East 73<sup>rd</sup> Street, but his father offered nothing more in the way of cash, hoping that Drum would be inspired to get a job. But instead, Drum had stayed home to care for the kids while Margot worked. Now, she sent him a support check for four thousand dollars every month, -- the trade-off, along with a lump sum of three hundred and sixty thousand dollars, for keeping the apartment..

However, after the phone call she had received last night, she supposed the palimony payments would end. Drum Sr. had called to tell her he was getting married.

"Married?" Margot had said. "To whom?"

"Lily," he said. "The Pilates instructor."

Margot had never heard of Lily the Pilates instructor before, and she had never heard the kids -- who flew to California the last weekend of every month, trips that were also financed by Margot -- mention anyone named Lily the Pilates instructor. There had been a Danielle, a Nicole, a Sara, pronounced "Sah-RAH." Drum had women moving through a revolving door. From what Margot could tell, girlfriends lasted three to four months, which aligned with what she knew to be his attention span.

"Well, congratulations," Margot said. "That's wonderful." She sounded genuine to her own ears; she *was* genuine. Drum was a good guy, just not the guy for her. She had been the one to end the marriage. Drum's laid back approach to the world -- which Margot had found so charming when she met him surfing on Nantucket -- had come to drive her insane. He was unambitious at best, a slacker at worst. That being said, Margot was astonished to find she felt a twinge of -- what? Jealousy? Anger? Resentment? at his announcement. It seemed unfair that news of Drum's nuptials should arrive less than 48 hours before Jenna's wedding.

*Everyone is getting married, she thought. Everyone but me.*

Jenna and Finn were as young and blond and pretty as a couple of milkmaids on a farm in Sweden. Finn looked more like Jenna than Margot did. Margot had straight black hair, the hair of a silk weaver in Beijing -- and she had six inches on her sister, the height of a tribeswoman on the banks of the Amazon. She had blue eyes like Jenna, but Jenna's were the same color as the sapphires in her engagement ring, whereas Margot's were ice blue, the eyes of a sled dog in Northern Russia.

Jenna, Margot thought with no small amount of envy, looked exactly like their mother. And so, bizarrely, did Finn, who had grown up three houses away.

"We need to get a picture of the three of us now," Jenna said. She took the camera from Margot and handed it to a man reading the newspaper in one of the plastic molded chairs.

"Do you mind?" Jenna asked sweetly.

The man rose. He was tall, about Margot's age, maybe a little older, he had a day or two of scruff on his face and he was wearing a white visor and sunglasses. He looked like he was going to Nantucket to sail in a regatta. Margot checked his left hand -- no ring. No girlfriend in the vicinity, no children in his custody, just a folded copy of the *Wall Street Journal* now resting on his seat as he rose to take the picture. "Sure," he said. "I'd love to."

Margot assumed that Jenna had picked this guy on purpose; Jenna was on a mission to find Margot a boyfriend. She had no idea that Margot had allowed herself to fall in love -- idiotically -- with Edge Desvesnes, their father's law partner. Edge was thrice married, thrice divorced, nineteen years Margot's senior, and wildly inappropriate in half a dozen other ways. If Jenna *had* known about Margot and Edge, she would only be more eager to introduce Margot to someone else.

Margot found herself assigned to the middle, pegged between the two blond bookends.

"I can't see your face," Regatta Man said, nodding at Margot. "Your hat is casting a shadow."

"Sorry," Margot said. "I have to leave it on."

"Oh, come on," Jenna said. "Just for one second while he takes the picture?"

"No," Margot said. If her skin saw the sun for even one second, she would detonate into a hundred thousand freckles. Jenna and Finn could be cavalier with their skin, they were young, but Margot would stand vigilant guard, despite the fact that she must now seem rigid and difficult to Regatta Man. She said in her most conciliatory voice, "Sorry."

"No worries," Regatta Man said. "Smile!" He took the picture.

There was something familiar about the guy, Margot thought. She knew him. Or maybe it was the Dramamine messing with her brain.

"Should I take one more, Margot?" he said. "Just to be safe?"

Regatta Man removed his sunglasses, and Margot felt like she'd been slapped. She lost her footing on the deck and tipped a little. Margot looked into Regatta Man's eyes to be sure. Sure enough, *heterochromia iridium* – dark blue perimeters with green centers. Or, as Margot had thought when she first saw him, he was a man with kaleidoscope eyes.

Before her stood Griffin Wheatley, Homecoming King. Otherwise known as just Griff. Who was, out of all the people in the world, among the top five Margot didn't want to bump into without warning. Didn't want to bump into at all. Maybe the top three.

"Griff!" Margot exclaimed. "How *are* you?"

"I'm good, I'm good," he said. He cleared his throat and nervously shoved the camera back at Margot; the question of the second photo seemed to have drifted off on the breeze. Margot figured Griff was about half as uncomfortable as she was. He would be thinking of her only as the bearer of disappointing news. She was thinking of him as the worst judgment call she had made in years. Oh God.

He said, "Did you hear I ended up taking the marketing job at Blankstar?"

Margot couldn't decide if she should pretend to be surprised by this, or if she should admit that she had been googling his name every single day until she was able to reassure herself that he'd landed safely. The job at Blankstar was a good one.

She changed the subject. "So why are *you* headed to Nantucket?" She tried to recall: Had Griff mentioned Nantucket in any of his interviews? No, she would have remembered if he had. He was from Maryland somewhere, which meant he had probably grown up going to Rehoboth, or Dewey.

"I'm meeting buddies for golf," he said.

Ah, yes, golf -- of course golf, and not sailing. Griff had spent two years on the lower rungs of the PGA tour. He'd made just enough money, he said, to buy a case of beer each week and have enough left over for the laundromat. He had lived out of the back of his 1986 Jeep Wrangler, and when he played well, at the Motel 6.

These details all came back unbidden. Margot couldn't stand here another second. She turned to Jenna, sending a telepathic message: *Get me out of here!* But Jenna was checking her phone. She was texting her beloved Stuart, perhaps, or any other of the one hundred and fifty guests who would gather on Saturday to drink in in the sight of Jenna wearing their mother's wedding gown.

"I'm here for my sister's wedding," Margot said. She chewed her bottom lip. "I'm the Maid of Honor."

He lit up with amused delight, as though Margot just told him she had been selected to rhumba with Antonio Banderas on *Dancing with the Stars*. "That's great!" he said.

He sounded far more enthusiastic than she felt.

She said, "Yes, Jenna is getting married on Saturday." Margot indicated "Jenna" with a Vanna White flourish of her hands, but Jenna's attention was glued to her phone. Margot was afraid to engage Jenna anyway, because what if Jenna asked how Margot and Griff knew each other?

Thankfully, Finn stepped forward. "I'm Finn Sullivan-Walker," she said. "I'm just a lowly bridesmaid."

Griff shook hands with Finn and laughed. "Not lowly, I'm sure."

"Not lowly at all," Margot said. This was the third time that Finn had made reference to the fact that she *wasn't* Jenna's Maid of Honor. She had been miffed when Jenna first announced her decision to Margot and Finn, over dinner at Dos Caminos. Finn had ordered three margaritas in rapid succession, then gone silent. And then she had gotten her nose out of joint about it again at the bridal shower. Finn was upset that she had been "stuck" writing down the list of gifts, while Margot the "Maid of Honor," fashioned the bows from the gifts into a goofy hat made from a paper plate. (Jenna was supposed to wear that "hat" tonight, to her bachelorette party. Margot had rescued it from the overly interested paws of her six-year-old daughter and had transported it here, more or less intact, in a white cardboard box from E.A.T. bakery.)

Margot had told Jenna that it would be fine if Jenna wanted to ask Finn to be the Matron of Honor. Margot was eleven years older than Jenna; Finn had always been more like Jenna's sister. Now, Jenna and Finn were both in the throes of the nuptial era; everyone they knew was getting married. For the two of them, being the Maid of Honor was an actual *honor* -- whereas Margot had been married and divorced and, quite frankly, couldn't care less.

But Margot knew the reason why Jenna would never ask Finn to be Matron of Honor. It was because of the Notebook. It had been assumed by their mother that Margot would serve as Jenna's Maid of Honor.

Margot said, "Finn just got married last October."

"Oh, really?" Griff said.

Finn gazed off the side of the boat at the mirrored surface of the water. "Yeah."

"Her husband is a golfer, too," Margot said. "Scratch!"

Finn's husband, Scott Walker, had been on the golf team at Stanford, where Tiger Woods had played. Now Scott was a hedge fund manager making a bajillion dollars a quarter.

Finn made a face like she had just eaten snail and vinegar stew, and Margot wondered if something was awry in her seemingly perfect marriage. Scott, Margot knew, wasn't coming to the wedding because of one of the inevitable conflicts for those mired in the nuptial era: *His* best friend, his roommate from Stanford, was having *his* bachelor party this very same weekend. Scott was in Las Vegas.

Probably, Finn just missed him, the way that Margot missed Edge. The way that Margot lived in a perpetual state of missing Edge. She had sex with Edge, she had conversations with Edge, some more meaningful than others, she occasionally had dinner with Edge -- but never the movies, never theater, never ever any kind of benefit or dance or party where other people they knew would be in attendance.

Those kinds of events Margot attended alone, or with her brother Nick, who was always sure to leave with someone else.

"Well!" Margot said. She was dying to put the small talk with Griffin Wheatley, Homecoming King, to bed. She would have excused herself to "check on the children below," but she wasn't feeling well enough to even step inside the cabin in the name of such a bluff. "Have fun playing golf! Birdie, birdie, eagle!"

"Thanks," Griff said. He took a step toward the chair where his *Wall Street Journal* awaited, and Margot thought, *Okay that's over. Good-bye, Griffin Wheatley, Homecoming King!* Jenna could have asked Idi Amin to take their picture and Margot might have been less flustered.

"See ya!" Margot said.

"Have a great wedding!" Griff said. And then to Finn he said, "Nice meeting you, lowly bridesmaid."

Finn scowled at him, but, undeterred, Griff called out to Jenna. "Congratulations!"

Jenna raised her eyes from her iphone long enough to offer the quick, impersonal wave of an Oscar winner.

Finn said, "I'm going down below."

Margot nodded and with a glance at Griff and another awkward, unnecessary "See ya!" she took Jenna by the arm and led her to the railing on the side of the boat opposite from Griff.

"Look!" Margot said. She pointed past the hovering seagulls and the scattered sailboats. They could both see clearly now: the north and south steeples of the churches, the column of Brant Point Lighthouse.

Nantucket Island, their summer home.

Jenna squeezed the heck out of Margot's hand. Just as Jenna had helped Margot with her seasickness by remembering to bring the Dramamine, so now Margot would forget about the unnerving interaction with Griffin Wheatley, Homecoming King, and focus on helping Jenna with her surfeit of overwhelming emotion.

"I miss her," Jenna said.

Margot's eyes stung. The longest, most excruciating weekend of her life had officially begun.

"I know, honey," she said, hugging her sister close. "I miss her, too."

#### **The Notebook, Page 4**

##### *The Reception.*

*The reception can be held under a tent in the backyard. Call Sperry Tents and ask for Ande. I worked with him on the benefit for the Nantucket Preservation Trust and he was a dream. I do here want to insert a warning and I hope you won't find it trivial: I would be heartbroken if anything happened to my perennial bed. By "perennial bed," I mean the narrow garden that runs along the eastern edge of the property from the white gate all the way to Alfie's trunk. The blue hardy geraniums, the moonbeam coreopsis, the black-eyed Susans, the plum pudding Heuchera, the coneflowers -- all of these I planted in 1972, when I was pregnant with Margot. That bed has bloomed reliably for decades because I have taken good care of it. None of you children seem to have inherited my love of gardening (unless you count Nick, and the pot plants in the attic) but trust me, you will notice if one summer those flowers don't bloom. Please, Jenna, make sure the perennial bed remains unmolested. Do not let the tent guys, or anyone else, trample my blue hardy geraniums.*

#### **Douglas**

Somehow, he had ended up with the Notebook.

It was Thursday afternoon. Doug had left the office early and had taken the 3:52 to New Canaan, Connecticut where he lived with Pauline, in a house across the street from the Silvermine Tavern. But when the conductor announced the stop for Darien, Doug grabbed his briefcase and stood halfway up before remembering.

Remembering that the life he had lived for thirty-five years -- married to Beth, father of four, in a center-entrance colonial on the Post Road -- was over. Beth was dead, she'd been dead seven years, the kids had all moved out, they had lives of their own, some of which they'd already managed to screw up, and Doug was now married to Pauline Tonelli, who had, once upon a time, been his client.

This wasn't the first time he'd nearly stood up at the Darien stop. But it seemed more meaningful today because today wasn't just any Thursday. Today was the Thursday before his youngest child got married.

The girls, as far as Doug knew, were already on Nantucket. They had a reservation for Margot's car on the afternoon ferry, which meant they would be arriving right about now, driving up Main Street to their home on Orange Street. They would pull the key from under the stone turtle in the garden, where the key had always been kept, despite the caretaker. They would walk into the house, they would throw open the windows and unstick the back screen door, they would turn on the water heater, they would make a shopping list. They would hasten to get all of the suitcases inside, but they would be arrested by the view of the sparkling harbor below. Margot's kids would head out to the backyard to see Alfie, the 200-year-old oak tree, and sit in the swing. Or at least Ellie would; the boys might be beyond that now.

Of course, Doug remembered when it was Jenna in that swing.

Pauline's car wasn't in the driveway, which came as a relief. For the past twelve months, maybe longer, Doug had found he was happier without Pauline around. This was a bad sign. For his entire professional life, Doug had sat on one side of his partners desk and listened while the person on the other side shared the details of his or her disintegrating marriage. Doug had heard it all -- He cheated with Her best friend, She cheated with the tennis pro, there was wife-swapping, He hit the kids, She had Munchausen's, She had a drinking problem, He gambled away the kids' college funds, He was addicted to pornographic websites, She abused prescription drugs, He lost his job and sat around the house all day in his bathrobe, She weighed three times what She had when He married Her, He was an asshole, She was a bitch, He wasn't giving Her one red cent, She was going to take Him for all He was worth. For thirty-five years, Doug had nodded along, pretending to be feeling his clients' angst, but really, he had no idea. He was happily married, he flat-out adored his wife. Even after twenty-five years of marriage, he had sat on this very train and looked forward to the moment he would walk into the house and see Beth.

It was only in the past year that Doug had finally understood what his clients were feeling. He didn't recognize himself in the dramatic scenes -- there was no abuse in his marriage to Pauline, no derelict behavior, no destructive habits, no special needs children, no financial woes, no infidelity -- rather, Doug identified with his quieter, sadder clients. The marriage no longer provided any joy. They got on one another's nerves, there was a constant buzz of low-level bickering, they were happier and more comfortable when they were apart from one another.

Yes, that was him. That was him exactly.

Pauline was out somewhere, she had probably told him where, but he had forgotten; it went in one ear and out the other, just as she always said. He didn't care where she was, as long as she wasn't home. Lately, Doug had even had fantasies of Pauline driving on Route 7 while talking on the phone to her daughter Rhonda, and having a fatal accident. He couldn't believe it. He had heard similar sentiments come out of his clients' mouths -- *I wish he/she would just die!* -- but he never believed himself

capable of such a thought. And yet, it did now occasionally cross his mind. He nearly always amended this fantasy. Pauline didn't have to *die* in order to set him free. She might, one day, wake up and decide that she wanted to go back to her ex-husband, Arthur Tonelli. She might climb into the car, get Rhonda immediately on the phone as was her annoying habit, and announce to Rhonda that she was driving to the Waldorf-Astoria to see if Arthur would take her back.

Doug shed his suit coat and his briefcase, and loosened his tie. He'd skipped lunch in order to get out of the office early. Edge was going to court first thing in the morning to deal with the shitshow Cranbrook case (Mr. Cranbrook, investment banker, leveraged to the hilt because he was keeping a woman on the side in an apartment on East 60th Street and had bought her a Porsche Carrera, all with his secret credit card, the fate of three children under seven, one of them with extreme special needs, hanging in the balance) -- and thus Edge wouldn't get to Nantucket until six o'clock tomorrow evening at the very earliest. He would miss the first round of golf, and Doug felt guilty about that. The Cranbrook case was Doug's case and it was a hot, steaming mess. Edge was helping Doug out by taking over tomorrow. Doug obviously couldn't do it himself and risk missing his daughter's wedding.

Doug was starving and went into the kitchen for something, anything, to eat. Pauline, like a housewife from the Depression Era, liked to leave the fridge and cupboards all but bare before they went away. In the crisper, Doug found one apple and a few stalks of celery. He bit into the apple and dragged the celery lavishly through a jar of peanut butter that he pulled out of the pantry.

And then he saw it on the kitchen counter, next to the prep sink where Pauline was defrosting a couple of sad-looking lamb chops that were probably going to be their dinner.

The Notebook.

His mouth was sticky with peanut butter, but he let a garbled cry escape: *Oh shit!*

The Notebook.

That was it, right? A spiral-bound notebook with the kelly green cover and the word in black Sharpie written in Beth's handwriting: WEDDING. The notebook itself had probably cost \$1.69 at Staples, but it was no less precious than the Magna Carta. That notebook contained all of Beth's hopes, wishes, and suggestions for Jenna's wedding. She had written it in the eight months between the time she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer, and the time she died. She had written it not to interfere or be prescriptive, but because more than anything she wanted Jenna to feel like she had a mother during that time when she most needed a mother.

Beth had filled the notebook hoping that she would be part of the special day, even though she would be gone. She planned the details of Jenna's wedding even though Jenna had not yet met the man who was to be her husband. Beth had confidence in Jenna. She would meet someone wonderful, and she would want a lavish, traditional wedding.

In the summertime, of course.

At the house on Nantucket, of course.

Their older daughter, Margot, had gotten married to a fellow named Drummond Bain on a cliff in Antigua with just the immediate family in attendance -- Doug and Beth, Nick and Kevin, Kevin's wife, Beanie, and Jenna. From Drum's side, only the Bain parents had attended because Drum was an only child. That was half the problem with Drum, or maybe that was the whole problem. He had been handed things without having to earn them. Mitchell Bain was a big shot with Sony, always back and forth to Tokyo. He had set up a trust fund for Drum on his 21st birthday. The kid had done nothing with his life but surf, ski, and zip carelessly through his money. Why had Margot fallen for *him*? Doug and Beth had gently expressed their reservations about Drum, but then Margot got pregnant. Doug had been sure Drum would say sayonara and run for the hills. Doug and Beth had actually wished for this to happen; they would help Margot raise the baby themselves. But Drum had done the unthinkable and proposed.

Margot had worn a flowing maternity dress to the ceremony, in a color Beth called "blush."

Doug remembered lying in bed with Beth after Margot's wedding. He and Beth, and Drum's parents, Mitchell and Greta Bain, had heedlessly plowed through six bottles of wine at the dinner. Kevin and Nick had pulled Drum off to the bar, and Margot had been left behind with Beanie, who was also pregnant, and Jenna, who had only been sixteen at the time. The three of them sipped sparkling water.

"She looked absolutely miserable tonight," Beth said.

"I wouldn't say *miserable*," Doug said.

"What word would you use to describe her, then?" Beth asked.

"Resigned," Doug said.

"Well, that's perfectly awful!" Beth said. "I wanted more for her. I wanted more than a shotgun wedding, even if it is in the Caribbean."

"Honey, she loves him," Doug said.

"It'll never last," Beth said.

Drummond Bain, Jr. had been born, and then Carson. When Beth had died, Margot hadn't been pregnant with Ellie yet. When Beth died, things were still okay between Margot and Drum Sr. But Beth had ended up being right, of course. The marriage didn't last.

Doug touched the front cover of the Notebook. He opened to the first page. *I wish for you a beautiful day, Jenna, my darling. You alone will make it so.*

Doug closed the Notebook. The rest of it was filled with information, ruminations, suggestions: Where in the closet to find Beth's wedding dress should Jenna want to wear it (of course Jenna would wear it) and the names of places to get it dry-cleaned and altered. Which flowers to use, which florist, what hymns were Beth's favorite, what to say when Jenna called Reverend Marlowe and asked him to perform the ceremony on Nantucket. The Notebook contained menu suggestions and an invitation list and poems Beth had clipped that would make excellent readings. Doug knew there were more than a few

"DO NOTS," such as *"Do not, under any circumstances, use Corinthians 13 as a reading. If you use Corinthians 13, you will hear a collective groan."*

Doug hadn't read the Notebook, although he had started out with that intention. He had meant to read the pages closely, as he would have a legal brief, before presenting it to Jenna, just after Stuart proposed. But Doug had found even reading the opening letter painful. Beth's voice was too vivid on the page, and the emotion was too raw. *My hand actually aches knowing that it will not be squeezing your hand just before you walk down the aisle.* Doug realized there were stories and memories, bits of Carmichael family lore -- some of which he might have forgotten -- interspersed throughout. It would be excruciating for him to read the pages that he'd watched Beth furiously scribbling, right up until the very end, when hospice arrived and the morphine made it difficult for her to hold a pen, much less write anything. Furthermore, the Notebook hadn't been meant for his eyes. It had been meant for Jenna; it was a mother-daughter document.

Doug had, however, stumbled across the following lines, in regard to him: *Your father is going to be a cause for concern. Margot is married, Kevin is married, and who knows if Nick will ever get married. So you're it, the last one, his baby flying from the nest. He will take it hard. But Jenna, he will have no prouder moment than escorting you down the aisle. I saw him with Margot before they walked out onto that cliff in Antigua. He could barely hold back the tears. You must promise me that you will A) Check to see that his tie is straight B) Pin his boutonniere and C) Please make sure he has a clean, white handkerchief. Even if your father has Another Wife, I want you to do those things. Do them for me, please.*

Doug had welled up when he read that paragraph. Jenna had been present when this happened. She had said, "If you think that's sad, you should skip ahead and read the last page."

"What's on the last page?" he said.

"Just read it," Jenna said.

"I can't," he said. "It's too hard."

"I think Mom would want you to see it," Jenna said.

"No," he'd said. And then, he had closed the Notebook.

Now, Doug thought to panic. The Notebook was *here*, on the *counter*, at Pauline's house (even now, five years after moving in, he still always thought of it as Pauline's house). Jenna was on *Nantucket*. It was the Thursday before the wedding. Two days before.

He pulled his cell phone out of his briefcase. He had an iPhone, purchased for him by his children, all of whom used iPhones themselves. Doug had been a BlackBerry user for years, Edge was a BlackBerry user, all self-respecting attorneys were BlackBerry users. iPhones were *toys*. But the children had bought him this iPhone and Margot had shown him how to use it, and demonstrated how easy it was to text. Then Drum Jr. had gotten one and Kevin's oldest son, Brandon, had gotten one and Doug liked the idea of being able to communicate with his grandsons. He found the iPhone made him feel younger than 64.

The face of Doug's phone was an emergency crash site. He had four missed calls from Margot, three missed calls from Jenna, a missed call from Pauline, two texts from Margot, two texts from Jenna, a text from Edge, and a text from Drum Jr. Doug didn't know where to look first. He decided to just call Margot.

"I have it," he said, peremptorily.

"Dad?" Margot said. "We have a crisis."

"No, you don't," he said. "I have it."

"Yes," she said. "We do."

"I have it!" Doug said. "It's here. The Notebook. I have it here, I'm looking right at it. I'll bring it with me tonight. She'll have it in her hands by nine a.m."

"Dad has it!" Margot shouted. To Doug, she said, "Thank God, oh thank God you have it. Jenna thought she left it in a cab because the last time she remembered having it was at dinner with you and Pauline at Locanda Verde, when she took a cab all the way uptown. *Yes, he has it, he has it!* Can you imagine how catastrophic that would have been? Okay, Dad, I've gotta go, because now she's having a reverse nervous breakdown that strongly resembles the nervous breakdown she's been having for the past thirty minutes. She's crying hysterically, but they're tears of relief, I'm happy to say." Margot paused, and Doug did indeed hear sounds of female hysteria in the background. "Jesus, can you imagine what would have happened if she'd left it in a cab? And it was gone forever?"

Doug swallowed. The thought was too awful to contemplate...*Please make sure he has a clean, white handkerchief.* Had there ever been a purer declaration of love? he wondered.

"No," he said.

"What is the Notebook doing there, anyway?" Margot asked.

"I..." Doug said.

"Forget it, Daddy, I have to go," Margot said. "This place is a madhouse."

"Okay, I'll..."

"See you in the morning," Margot said. "Don't forget to bring it!"

"I won't," Doug said.

He carried the Notebook upstairs and slid it into the pocket of his suitcase right away, just to put his mind at ease.

What was the Notebook doing there?

Doug lay down on the bed for a second -- still in his shirt and tie and suit pants and Gucci loafers. He was suddenly tired. He and Pauline would be arising at three a.m. in order to make his 10:30 am tee time at Sankaty; the mere thought was exhausting. Plus, Pauline set the air-conditioner lower in the bedroom the way he liked it; the cool room was begging him to nap.

What was the Notebook doing there?

Jenna had brought it to dinner at Locanda Verde. Doug remembered her setting it on the table next to the platter of crostini with house-made herbed ricotta. He remembered Jenna saying, "There's a cheat sheet in here, Daddy, an index card with the names of all of Mom's cousins and their spouses and children. I memorized it, and you should, too."

"Sure," Doug had said automatically. He then wondered what it would be like to see Beth's cousins, people he hadn't seen since the funeral. He was grateful when conversation turned to another topic.

If the wine had gone to her head, Jenna might have left the Notebook at the restaurant. But she *hadn't* left it at the restaurant. It had ended up here.

How, though? He certainly hadn't carried it out.

So there was only one answer: Pauline had taken the Notebook and brought it home. However, Doug did *not* remember Jenna offering to show the Notebook to Pauline, nor did he remember Pauline asking to see the Notebook. If that had happened, he would have remembered. Pauline was jealous of the Notebook, which really meant that Pauline was jealous of Beth. Beth, who had been dead seven years, who had died in a matter of months under excruciatingly painful circumstances, leaving behind the family she'd loved more than anything. How could Pauline be jealous of Beth? How could she begrudge Jenna a missive filled with motherly love and advice? Well, Pauline hadn't been granted access to the

Notebook, a fact that bugged the shit out of her, but as Doug pointed out, the Notebook was private. It was Jenna's choice to share it or not share it. Pauline was further bothered because she had offered to take Jenna shopping for a wedding dress and Jenna had informed Pauline that she would be wearing Beth's dress (as per the Notebook). Pauline had suggested calla lilies in the bridal bouquet; Jenna was going with limelight hydrangeas and tight white peonies (as per the Notebook). Pauline had wanted herself and Doug listed on the invitation by name, but Jenna had gone with this wording: *Jennifer Bailey Carmichael and Stuart James Graham, along with their families, invite you to share in the celebration of their marriage* (as per the Notebook).

Doug had gently advised Pauline to back off where the wedding was concerned. Pauline had a daughter of her own. When it was Rhonda's turn to get married, Pauline could interfere all she wanted.

"When Rhonda gets married?" Pauline had exclaimed.

"Yes," Doug said.

"She'll never get married!" Pauline said. "She's never had a relationship last more than six weeks."

This was true. Rhonda had pretty, dark hair like her mother and she was very thin. Too thin, if you asked Doug. She spent something like five hours a day at the gym. Going to the gym was Rhonda's *job*, and freelance graphic design was a hobby from which she received the occasional paycheck. She was thirty-eight years old and Arthur Tonelli still paid her rent and gave her an allowance. At thirty-eight! The reason Rhonda's relationships didn't last was because she was impossible to please. She was negative, dour, and unpleasant. She never smiled. The reason Rhonda worked freelance was because she'd lost her last three office jobs due to "problems cooperating with co-workers," and "insufficient interpersonal skills with clients." Which meant: No one liked her. Except, of course, for Pauline. Mother and daughter were best friends. They told each other everything; there was *absolutely no filter*. This fact alone made Doug uncomfortable around Rhonda. He was sure that Rhonda knew how frequently he and

Pauline made love (lately, about once a month) as well as the results of his prostate exam, and the cost of his bridge work.

Pauline was right: Rhonda would never get married. Pauline would never become a grandmother. And so could Doug really blame her for clinging to his family with such desperation?

Pauline burst into the bedroom and Doug sat straight up in bed. He had fallen asleep; his mouth was cottony and still tasted faintly of peanut butter.

"Hi," he said.

"Were you *sleeping*?" she asked. She was wearing her tennis clothes, but had removed her shoes and socks and so Doug smelled, or imagined he could smell, her feet.

"I took a nap," he said. "I was tired, and I thought it would be a good idea, considering the drive." Doug studied his wife. She was an ample woman with large breasts and wide hips; she was the despondent possessor of what she called a "muffin top," which kept her constantly dieting. Food wasn't just food with Pauline; it was a daily challenge. She always started off well -- power-walking along the Silvermine River with two other women from the neighborhood, and coming home to eat a bowl of yogurt with berries. But then there was a thick sandwich with fries at the country club, followed by the two pieces of pound cake she ate at book group, and not only would Doug have to hear about it when he got home from work, he would have to share in Pauline's punishment: A dinner that consisted of grilled green beans and eggplant, or a bowl of Special K.

Beth had been such a good cook. Doug would kill to taste her creamy mac and cheese, or her pan fried pork chops smothered with mushroom sauce. But he didn't like to compare.

He was glad to see Pauline had actually gone to play tennis. Her dark hair was in a ponytail, her forehead had a sheen of sweat that gave her a certain glow. The short, pleated skirt showed off her legs, which were her best feature. Sometimes Pauline went to the club to "play tennis," but the courts would be

booked, so instead she would sit at the bar with Caroline Potter and Alice Quincy and they would drink chardonnay for two hours, and Pauline would come home feeling combative.

Pauline was a prodigious drinker of chardonnay. Doug remembered that during the divorce proceedings, Arthur had referred to Pauline as "the wino." Doug had found that mean and unnecessary at the time, but he now realized that Arthur had not been complaining for no reason.

"How was tennis?" Doug asked.

"Fine," Pauline said. "It felt good to work out some of my anxiety."

*Anxiety?* Doug thought. He knew an attentive husband would ask about the source of his wife's anxiety, but Doug didn't want to ask. Then he realized that Pauline had anxiety about the upcoming weekend. He remembered the Notebook, now safely tucked into his suitcase.

He swung his feet to the floor, and loosened his tie. "Pauline," he said.

She pulled her top off over her head and unhooked her sturdy white bra. Her breasts were set free. Had they always hung so low, he wondered?

"I'm going to shower," she said. "And then I have to finish packing. We're having lamb chops for dinner." She wriggled out of her skirt and her underwear. She stood before him naked. Pauline was not an unlovely woman; if he touched her, he knew her skin would be soft and smooth and warm. Once upon a time, Doug had been very attracted to Pauline; their lovemaking had always been a strong point between them. He allowed himself to think about having wild, ravishing sex right now, maybe up against the closet door. Doug willed himself to feel a stir of arousal. He envisioned his mouth on Pauline's neck, her hand down his pants.

Nothing.

This was not good.

"Pauline," Doug said.

Pauline turned to face him, panicked. She sensed, maybe, that he was after sex -- which she explicitly did not allow during daylight hours.

"What?" she said.

"Did you take the Notebook from the restaurant last night?"

"What notebook?" Pauline said.

Doug closed his eyes, wishing she hadn't just said that. He lowered his voice, the way he would have for a hostile witness, or a client who insisted on lying to him, despite the fact that he had been hired to help.

"You know which notebook."

Pauline's forehead wrinkled and her eyes widened and she did, at that moment, resemble Rhonda very strongly, which did not improve her case. "You mean the green notebook? Jenna's notebook?"

"Yes," Doug said. "Jenna's notebook. I found it downstairs. Did you take it?" The question was ridiculous -- of course she'd taken it -- but Doug wanted to hear her admit to it.

"Why are you being so weird?" Pauline asked.

"Define 'weird,'" Doug said.

"Define weird.' Don't harass me, counselor. Save it for the courtroom." Pauline took a step toward the bathroom, but Doug wasn't going to let her escape. He stood up.

"Pauline."

"I need to get in the shower," Pauline said. "I'm not going to stand around *naked* while you *accuse* me of things."

Doug followed Pauline to the bathroom. He stood in the doorway as she turned on the water. This was the master bath she had shared with Arthur Tonelli for over twenty years. Pauline and Arthur had built this house together; they had picked out the tile and the sink and the fixtures. For the first few years of their marriage, Doug had felt like an impostor in this bathroom. What was he doing using Arthur Tonelli's bathroom? What was he doing sleeping with Arthur Tonelli's wife? But by now, Doug had grown used to it. He and Beth had renovated their 1836 colonial on the Post Road until it was exactly to their taste, but after Beth died, it occurred to Doug that material things -- even whole, entire rooms -- held no meaning. A bathroom was a bathroom was a bathroom.

"Did you take the Notebook?" Doug asked.

Pauline tested the water with her hand. She did not answer.

"Pauline..."

She whipped around. "Yes," she said. "Jenna left it on the table at the restaurant last night and I picked it up." She widened her brown eyes at him. When they'd first met, her eyes had reminded Doug of chocolate candy. "I *rescued* the Notebook. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'd like to take a shower. In peace."

"No," Doug said. "I will not excuse you. Why didn't you give it back to Jenna? What is it doing here?"

"She was in a hurry, remember? She and Stuart raced away in that cab."

What Doug remembered was standing out on Greenwich Avenue trying to hail Jenna and Stuart a cab, but having no luck. That far downtown, cabs were impossible to find. What Doug remembered was considering asking the maitre'd to call a car service for the kids, but then at the last moment, a cab appeared and Jenna and Stuart hopped in it. But there had been a full ten minutes, maybe longer, with the four of them outside on the sidewalk. And Pauline had had the Notebook; she had probably stuffed it into one of the enormous purses she liked to carry.

"She wasn't in a hurry," Doug said. "We waited around for goddamned ever for that cab. I'm not wrong about that, am I?"

"I forgot to give it back to her," Pauline said. "I meant to, but then we were so caught up in trying to get them a cab, I forgot."

"You forgot?" Doug said.

"Yes."

"Really?"

Pauline nodded once, with conviction. That was her story and she was sticking to it. As Arthur Tonelli's bathroom filled with steam, Doug realized something. He realized that he did not love Pauline. It was possible that he had never loved Pauline. On Monday, once the wedding was over and they were safely back at home, he was going to ask Pauline for a divorce.

He turned and walked out. It felt good to have made that decision.

Pauline must have sensed something dire because she shut off the water, wrapped herself in a towel, and followed him out.

"I need you to believe me," she said.

Doug watched her clench the towel to her chest. Her thick, dark hair, out of its ponytail, fell in damp ropes over her shoulders.

"I do believe you," he said.

"You do?" she said.

"Yes," he said. "You've presented a plausible argument. Jenna left behind the Notebook, you wisely scooped it up and amidst all the brouhaha of trying to flag a taxi, you forgot to return it to her."

Pauline exhaled. "Yes."

"My question now is, did you read it?"

As Pauline stared at him, he watched conflicting emotions cross her face. He was an attorney; he dealt every day with people who wanted to lie to him.

"Yes," she admitted. "I read it."

"You read it," he said. He had no reason to be surprised, but he was anyway.

"It was driving me crazy," Pauline said. "The Notebook this, the Notebook that, what 'Mom' wrote in the Notebook. Your daughters -- and you, too, Douglas -- treated the thing like the fifth gospel. Jenna wouldn't accept one suggestion -- *not one* -- from me. She only wanted to follow what was in the goddamned Notebook. And I wanted to see exactly what that was. I wanted to see what Beth had to say."

Doug didn't like hearing his second wife speak his first wife's name. This had always been true.

"So you read it?" Doug said. "You read it today? While I was at work?"

"Yes," Pauline said. "And I have to say, Beth covered all the bases. She let Jenna know exactly what she wanted -- down to the pattern of the silver, down to the song you and Jenna should dance to, down to the earrings Jenna should wear with 'the dress.' It was the most blatant exercise in mind control I have ever seen. Beth planned her *own* wedding. She didn't leave anything for Jenna to decide."

Doug wondered if Pauline had read the last page. He wondered what the last page said.

"I think those were meant to be suggestions," Doug said, feeling defensive.

"*Suggestions?*" Pauline said. "Beth flat-out *told* Jenna what to do."

"Jenna is a strong person," Doug said. "If she had disagreed with something Beth wrote, she would have changed it."

"And go against the wishes of her dead mother?" Pauline said. "Never."

"Hey now," Doug said. "That's out of line."

"I offered to take Jenna out to try on wedding dresses," Pauline said. "To try them on, that was all, to see what else was out there, to see if there was anything that suited her better than Beth's dress -- and she wouldn't go. She wouldn't even *try*."

"I'm sure she looks lovely in Beth's dress," Doug said.

"You know," Pauline said. "I thought it was a good thing that you were widowed instead of divorced. I was *glad* there wasn't an ex-wife I had to see at family functions or that you were paying alimony to. But guess what? Beth is more intrusive than any ex-wife could have been."

"Intrusive?" Doug said. "Define intrusive."

"She's everywhere. Especially with this wedding. She is a palpable presence in the room. She is an untouchable standard by which the rest of us have to be judged. She has taken on sainthood. Saint Beth, the dead mother, whose memory grows more burnished every day."

"Enough," Doug said.

"I just can't compete," Pauline said. "I'll never come first, not with the kids, not with you. You are, all of you Carmichaels, obsessed with her."

Doug thought hearing such words might anger him, but he merely found them validating.

"Listen," Doug said. "I don't think you should come to Nantucket this weekend."

"*What?*" Pauline said.

"I guess what I'm really trying to say is that I don't *want* you to come to Nantucket this weekend. It's my daughter's wedding and I think it would be best if I went alone." Doug heard Pauline inhale, but he didn't wait around for what she was going to say. He left the bedroom, shutting the door behind him.

Down the stairs, through the kitchen. His cell phone was on the counter. He snatched it up, and saw the two meager lamb chops sitting in a pool of bloody juices.

He wasn't going to eat them. He was going out for pizza.

### **The Notebook, Page 6**

*The wedding party.*

*I assume you will ask Margot to be your Matron of Honor. The two of you have such a close relationship, and whereas at times I worried about the large age gap between you and the older three, I think that in Margot's case, it was for the best. She was your sister, yes, but she was also a surrogate mother at times, or something between a sister and a mother, whatever that role might be called. Remember how she did your make-up for the ninth grade dance? You wanted green eyeshadow and she gave you green eye shadow, somehow making it look pretty damn good. And remember how she drove you down to William & Mary your sophomore year so that Daddy and I could celebrate our thirtieth anniversary on Nantucket? Margot is the most capable woman you or I will ever know. And to butcher the old song: Anything I can do, she can do better.*

*I assume you will also ask Finn. The two of you have been inseparable since birth. I used to call you my "twins." Not sure that Mary Lou Sullivan appreciated that, but the two of you were adorable together when you were with me. The matching French braids, the playground rhymes you used to sing with the hand clapping. Miss Mary Mac Mac Mac, all dressed in black, black, black.*

*As far as your brothers are concerned, I would ask Kevin to do a reading, and ask Nick to serve as an usher, assuming your Intelligent, Sensitive Groom-to-Be doesn't have nine brothers or sixteen guys who served in his platoon who can't be ignored. Kevin has that wonderful orator's voice. I swear he is the spiritual descendant of Lincoln or Daniel Webster. And Nick will charm all of the ladies as he escorts them to their seats. Obviously.*

*The other person who would be terrific as an usher is Drum Sr. Of course if Margot is your Matron of Honor, she might need Drum to watch the boys.*

*And then there's your father, but we'll talk about him later.*

## **Margot**

It felt so good to be back in the house of her childhood summers that Margot forgot about everything else for a minute.

The house was two and a half blocks off Main Street, on the side of Orange Street that overlooked the harbor. It had been bought by Margot's great-great-great grandfather in 1873, only 27 years after the Great Fire destroyed most of downtown. The house had five bedrooms, plus an attic that Margot's grandparents had filled with four sets of bunk beds and one lazy ceiling fan. It was shambling now, although back in its heyday, it had been quite grand. There were still certain antiques around -- an apothecary chest with 36 tiny drawers, grandfather and grandmother clocks that announced the hour in unison, gilded mirrors, Eastlake twin beds and a matching dresser in the boys' bedroom upstairs -- and there were fine rugs, all of them now faded by the sun and each permanently embedded with twenty pounds of sand. There was a formal dining room with a table seating sixteen where no one ever ate, although Margot remembered doing decoupage projects with her grandmother at that table on rainy days. One year, Nick and Kevin found turtles at Miacomet Pond and they decided the turtles should race the length of the table. Margot remembered one of the turtles veering off the side of the table and crashing to the ground, where it lay upside-down, its feet desperately pedaling through the air.

There was a set of four original Roy Bailey paintings in the kitchen which might have been valuable, but they were coated in bacon grease, and splattered oil from their father's famous cornmeal onion rings. At one point, Margot's mother had said, "Yes, this was a lovely house until we got a hold of it. Now, it is merely a useful house, and a well-loved house."

Margot was shocked at how well-loved. She felt euphoric at the sight of the dusty brick of the kitchen floor, the old wooden countertops scarred by a hundred and forty years of knives coarsely chopping garden tomatoes, the sound of the screen door slamming as her children ran out back to the green lawn, the seventy-foot oak tree named "Alfie" -- after Alfred Coates Hamilton, the original owner of the house -- and the wooden swing that hung from Alfie's lowest branch.

Margot had lived in the city all of her adult life. She loved Manhattan -- but not like this. Her adoration of Nantucket was matched only by her adoration of her children. She wanted to be buried here, in the shade of Alfie's leaves, if possible. She would have to write that down somewhere.

No sooner had Margot entered the house and allowed herself those sixty seconds of appreciation than crisis struck. Jenna stood in front of Margot holding open her Mielie bag, handmade by a woman in Cape Town, South Africa. Jenna was sobbing.

"What?" Margot said. She had certainly expected tears from Jenna this weekend. Jenna was an idealist, and the world was constantly falling short. But so soon? Ten minutes after their arrival? "What is it?"

"The Notebook!" Jenna said. "It's *gone!*"

Margot peered into the depths of Jenna's bag -- there was her wallet made from hemp, the handkerchief Jenna used like a character from a Merchant-Ivory film because, unlike Kleenex, handkerchiefs could be washed and reused, her Aveeno lip balm, the package of Dramamine, and her cell phone. There was no Notebook.

"Maybe you put it somewhere else," Margot said.

"I keep it here," Jenna said. "Right here in my bag. You know I keep it right here."

Yes, Margot did know that; she had seen Jenna remove and return the Notebook from that bag a hundred times. Jenna was the kind of person who had a place for everything, and her place for the Notebook was in that bag.

Margot laid her hands on Jenna's shoulders. "Calm down," she said. "Let's think. When was the last time you remember having it?"

Instead of this question focusing Jenna, it caused her to become more scattered. She cast around the kitchen, her eyes frantic. Jenna was the kindest, most nurturing soul Margot knew; the students and parents at the Little Minds school adored her. As the youngest by such a large span of years -- there were eight plus years between Jenna and Nick -- Jenna had been raised in the warm bath of their parents' love. Her childhood and adolescence had involved little conflict. The downside to this was that Jenna wasn't great with crises.

"Think," Margot said. "Stop and think. Did you have it on the boat?"

"No," Jenna said. "I haven't seen it at all today. I had it last night at...Locanda Verde." Her face dissolved.

"Whoa, whoa," Margot said. "No big deal. We can *call* Locanda Verde..."

"Then Stuart and I got into a cab!" Jenna said. "What if I left it in a cab?"

Margot's heart sank. What if Jenna had left it in a cab? Margot would go through the motions of calling the dispatcher's office, but they wouldn't have it. Once you left something in a New York City cab it was gone forever. How many pairs of sunglasses lost each day? Margot wondered. How many cell phones? How many copies of *Fifty Shades of Grey*? There was a massive redistribution of personal belongings every day across the five boroughs because of what people had left behind in cabs. The Notebook! Like Jenna, Margot had read the Notebook front to back and back to front, focusing most intently on the passages that mentioned her; she felt a piercing loss at the thought of never seeing it again.

Jenna was on her phone.

Margot said, "Who are you calling?"

"Stuart!" Jenna said.

Stuart, of course. Margot thought, with a glimmer of hope, that maybe Stuart had the Notebook. If he didn't, he would fly out the door of his office and drive to godforsaken who-knows-where-Brooklyn-or-Queens to personally dig through the Lost and Found at the dispatcher's office. Stuart would be able to offer Jenna comfort; he was the only one who mattered.

Margot didn't have anyone like that. She could never call Edge about something like the Notebook. Instead, she called her father. No answer. She called again and left a voicemail.

"Hey, Dad, it's me, Margot. Jenna has misplaced the Notebook. She had it last night at dinner, she said? She thinks maybe she left it in the cab? Any thoughts? Call me back."

Margot then sent her father a text: *Jenna lost Notebook.*

And another text: *Please call me.*

Jenna, meanwhile, was still on the phone with Stuart. In the Notebook, their mother had referred to Jenna's future husband, whomever he may be, as Intelligent, Sensitive Groom-to-Be -- and Stuart fit the bill. Jenna had already calmed down; she had stopped crying.

Margot marched upstairs. Jenna's luggage was in the hallway, and Margot started to look through it, thinking, *Please appear, please appear.*

What appeared were a pair of shapely, tanned legs. Finn's legs. Margot used to have legs like that, back in her surfing days, back before she worked sixty-five hours a week trying to support three kids and an ex-husband.

Finn said, "Why are you going through Jenna's things?"

Her voice was accusatory, but Margot didn't even both looking up.

Finn said, "Oh shit."

"Exactly," Margot said. A second later, her cell phone buzzed in her pocket. Involuntarily, Margot thought: *Edge*.

But it was her father.

"I have it," he said.

Margot filled with silly relief and Jenna sobbed with tears of joy. One of the best feelings in the world was finding something you were sure you'd lost forever.

A little while later, a white van pulled into the driveway behind Margot's LR3. She poked her head out the side door. The Sperry Tent company. She hoped she didn't have to sign anything or decide anything. She hoped the four guys who hopped out of the truck knew exactly what they were doing. She hoped that Roger, the wedding planner, had reminded the tent guys about her mother's perennial bed.

Beth had been a fanatical gardener and some of those perennials were over forty years old, which made them heirloom. Or maybe not. Margot knew nothing about gardening; she killed one store-bought herb garden every year by placing it on her fire escape and forgetting to water it.

Out the back screen door, which faced the yard, Margot called to her children, "The gentlemen are here to set up the tent! Either make yourself useful or get out of the way!" Ellie was lying on her stomach on the swing, spinning in circles until the ropes were twisted to the top.

"Eleanor, come in, please!" Margot called.

"No!" Ellie said.

Margot sighed. Was it too early for wine?

Upstairs, Margot heard Jenna and her maidens milling around; she caught the occasional burst of laughter. The hysteria over the missing Notebook had subsided -- THANK GOD -- and shortly thereafter, Autumn Donahue had arrived in a cab from the airport. Autumn had been Jenna's roommate at the College of William and Mary. She had beautiful copper-colored hair and freckles and brown eyes, and was the visual antidote to Jenna and Finn's uncompromising blondness. Autumn swore like a sailor, and she could turn any situation pornographic in seconds. At the bridal shower, which had been attended by Pauline, as well as Jenna's future mother-in-law, Ann Graham, Autumn had seen fit to give Jenna a two-headed vibrator and a tube of lubricant.

"Just turn that thing on for Stuart," Autumn had said. "He'll love it."

Autumn always dated three men at the same time; she called these men her "lov-ahs," and she sometimes threw a random one-night-stand into the mix. She had never been in love; she had no intention of ever falling in love.

Quite frankly, Margot admired this about Autumn.

Margot was waiting for a text from Edge. She had texted him the night before to tell him that Drum Sr. was getting married. What she'd written was: *Drum Sr. is getting married to someone named Lily the Pilates instructor.*

When, after thirty minutes, she hadn't received a response, she had written: *No, seriously, Drum Sr. is getting married.*

Margot had fallen asleep with the phone in her hand, waiting for a response. But in the morning, there was still nothing from Edge. Margot found this silence perplexing. He often let one or more of her texts go without a response, but a text about her ex-spouse re-marrying? That was real *news*. It deserved *something*. Then Margot began to worry that Edge wasn't responding because he thought Margot was fishing for a proposal herself. Ha! The mere idea of a proposal from Edge was ludicrous. He

had only allowed her to spend the night at his apartment once -- and then only because he'd had a favor to ask her.

She wouldn't let herself think about that night, Picholine for dinner first, then the unprecedented invitation to sleep over, then the ask, like a cold hand on her throat. Griffin Wheatley, Homecoming King. She *couldn't* think about it.

Maybe Edge was just busy. He had been preparing for court all week; he was taking over something called the "shitshow Cranbrook case" for Margot's father. Margot had asked what that meant but he hadn't told her; he couldn't tell her about any of his cases -- not only because it was privileged information, but because Edge didn't want Margot to accidentally slip up in front of her father.

The result of this was that Margot knew next to nothing about Edge's work life or how he spent his days. She almost preferred the way things had been with Drum Sr. Drum Sr. had done nothing for work, but at least that 'nothing' had been reported to Margot in excruciating detail. *Going for run in park. Back from run. ATM, \$80. Warren Miller film -- off the hook! Thinking about enchiladas for dinner -- ok with u? Store. Sale on canned tomatoes, buying 3. Picking up Ellie now. Walking. What is name of Peyton's mom? And what is wrong with her face?* Margot used to sit in her office at Miller-Sawtooth which was the most prestigious executive search firm in the world and receive these texts and think, *Don't you understand that I am too busy for this piddly-shit?*

Now, with Edge, Margot would kill for some piddly-shit. She would kill to know what he had for breakfast. But he told her nothing. If he was feeling expressive, he would text, *In court. Or, With Audrey*, who was his six-year-old daughter.

Margot checked her phone: Nothing. It was quarter to six. Maybe Edge was in a meeting with a new client; those could take a while. Maybe he was so busy preparing for court -- with his favorite paralegal, *Rosalie* -- that he simply hadn't had time to check his phone. But Edge checked his phone compulsively. The red light blinked and he salivated as though the next text or email was going to offer

him a million free dollars, or a house on the beach in Tahiti. With clients, he prided himself on responding within sixty seconds. But Margot he let languish for days.

Most of Margot and Edge's relationship had taken place via text, which had started out seeming modern and sexy. They would go back and forth for hours -- and unlike in actual conversation, Margot could take her time to compose witty responses. She could text things she was too shy to express in person.

But the texting now was frustrating beyond all comprehension. It made Margot want to tear her hair out. It made her -- late one night when she and Edge had been going back and forth and then she texted *I miss u*, and heard nothing back -- throw her phone across the room, where it, thankfully, landed in her laundry basket. She both hated the texting and was addicted to it. She despised her phone -- the seventy-two times a day she checked to see if Edge had texted were torturous -- and then if she did have a text from him, she went to absurd lengths to answer it, no matter what she was doing. She had answered texts from him in big client meetings under the table. She had stood up and left Ellie's kindergarten play (*Stone Soup*) in order to text Edge from the school corridor. She had texted while driving, she had texted him drunkenly from the bathroom while she was out with her girlfriends, she had texted him from the treadmill at the gym. The texting with Edge was keeping her from being present in her real life. It was awful, she had to stop, she had to control it somehow, to keep it from destroying her.

Because now, on Thursday, July 8th, instead of focusing on her sister's bachelorette party, which she, Margot, had organized and which was due to begin shortly, Margot was thinking: *I texted him nineteen hours ago and he hasn't responded. Why not? Where is he and what is he doing? He isn't thinking about me.*

Margot remembered when she had stood in this very house waiting for the mail to arrive because she was expecting a letter from her high school boyfriend, Grady Maclean. That had been stressful in the same sort of way, except then all of Margot's anxiety had been focused on one moment of the day and

once she got a letter -- Grady Maclean had been pretty devoted for a 15-year-old boy -- she didn't have to sweat it out until the following week.

At that moment, a text came into Margot's phone and Margot thought, *There he is, finally!* But when she checked, she saw it was a text from her father. Okay, that was absolutely the worst: She waited and waited for a text, and then a text came in, but from the wrong person.

The text read: *Pauline isn't coming to the wedding.*

Margot stared at her phone. She thought, *WTF?* Her mind was whizzing now. This was family drama, exactly the type that was supposed to happen at weddings. Pauline wasn't coming!

Why did this news make Margot feel so buoyant? Was it because deep down Margot didn't *like* Pauline, or was it because Margot was grateful for something to think about other than Drum Sr. getting married to Lily the Pilates instructor or Edge's non-response to Drum Sr. marrying Lily the Pilates instructor, or...Griffin Wheatley, who was still irritating a part of Margot's mind. (He had looked *great* with the scruff on his face -- like Tom Ford, or James Denton. Margot had always seen him within an hour of his last shave.)

Margot decided she was simply grateful for the distraction. She had nothing against Pauline, Pauline was harmless, Pauline was devoted to their father. So then *why* wasn't she coming to the wedding?

And what about Rhonda? Margot wondered. Would Rhonda still come to the wedding? Rhonda Tonelli, Pauline's daughter, was serving as Jenna's fourth bridesmaid. Jenna hadn't wanted Rhonda, but their father had asked (okay, begged) and since he was paying well into the six figures to make this wedding happen, Jenna had acquiesced.

It would be much better if neither Pauline nor Rhonda came this weekend. Margot felt a space open up in her chest where, apparently, anxiety about Pauline and Rhonda had been residing like an undiagnosed tumor.

There would be an uneven number of bridesmaids and groomsmen. Roger might fret about that, but who cared?

Maybe they could find someone to fill in for Rhonda. Jenna had a group of fellow teachers from Little Minds coming.

Margot's thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the side door. Margot spun around, phone in hand. It was Roger.

"Roger!" Margot said. "I was just thinking about you."

Roger blinked. Something was wrong. Had he already heard they might be down a bridesmaid?

"The tent guys have an issue with the tree," he said.

"What tree?" Margot said. "You mean Alfie?"

Roger swallowed. He was uncomfortable, she knew, calling the tree by a person's name.

"I thought we went over all of this," Margot said. "I thought they could fit the tent under Alfie."

"They thought so too, Margot," Roger said. "But that one branch has dropped since we measured it in April. It's dropped a lot."

"Shoot," Margot said. She didn't have time to deal with another unforeseen snafu. It was already six o'clock, she needed to unpack her suitcase and hang up her bridesmaid dress, she needed to run to the store for groceries, feed her children, take a shower, change, and she had hoped to open a bottle of champagne here with Jenna and the girls before their dinner reservation at eight. "I'm sure you guys will figure out what to do."

"I'll tell you what we need to do," Roger said. "If you want the big tent to go up, you are going to have to let them cut that branch."

"Which branch?" Margot asked. She was relieved that this problem had a solution. Maybe. She and Roger walked to the back door together and peered at Alfie. Margot's chest, that had for a few short, sweet minutes been a wide open breezeway, now felt like it was clogging with cement. "Which branch are you talking about? *Not* the..."

"The branch with the swing," Roger said.

Ellie was still on that swing, twisting then spinning out -- just as Margot used to do.

"No," Margot said.

"It's the only way."

"It can't be the only way."

"Look at how low that branch is," Roger said. "Compare it to the rest of the branches. The tent guys have a chain saw; they can take it down in ten minutes. It's really not that big, compared to the rest of the tree. The tree will survive."

"No," Margot said. "That branch is...the swing is...they're important. They're not going anywhere."

Roger brought his hand to his mouth. He had been a smoker for thirty years, he'd told Margot back in October, when she and Jenna first met him, but he'd quit cold turkey after his brother-in-law died of lung cancer.

"Okay, then," Roger said. "No tent."

"No *tent*?" Margot said.

"Not the big one you and Jenna picked out," Roger said. "It won't fit. Now, I can ask Ande if he can put up a smaller tent closer to the edge of the bluff. That will cover the bar and dance floor, maybe the head table. But everyone else will be exposed."

"What are we going to do if it rains?" Margot asked.

"I think you know the answer to that," Roger said. "You're going to get wet."

Margot couldn't look at Roger because she couldn't stand to see the stark truth on his face.

Roger had lived on Nantucket all his life. He had graduated from Nantucket High School in 1972 -- which made him, Margot had realized, the same age as Edge. Fifty-nine. He had worked for years as a carpenter and a caretaker, and then in 2000, a dot-com bazillionaire had thrown the wedding-to-end-all-weddings at Galley Beach. There wasn't a dance floor big enough on the island, and so the family had hired Roger to build one. In this way, he had stumbled into the wedding business through the back door.

He wasn't like any wedding planner Margot had met or imagined. He wasn't anal or super high-energy. He wasn't stylish, young, or hip. He was no-nonsense, he was reliable, he knew everybody one needed to know on this island. He exuded authority, he showed up early, worked hard, got things done. He had been married for thirty-five years to a woman named Rita; they had five children, all grown. Roger and Rita lived in an unassuming house on Surfside Road. Roger used the apartment over the garage as his office. Roger wrote everything down on a clipboard; he kept a pencil behind his ear, and a phone on his hip. He drove a pick-up truck. When Jenna and Margot had first met him, they'd thought, *This* is the most sought-after wedding planner on Nantucket? Now that they'd seen him in action, they knew why. He could talk canapés and floral arrangements and price per head with the best of them. But his company -- if that was what it was -- didn't even have a name. When Roger answered his phone, he said, "This is Roger."

Roger was what they were paying for, and Roger was what they got. And now here was Roger telling Margot that they had to cut down the branch that supported the tree swing, or a hundred and fifty guests would be without a tent.

They couldn't go without a tent. So Margot would have to let them cut the branch.

She checked the weather for Saturday on her phone. This was the only thing she'd been more compulsive about than checking for texts from Edge. The forecast for Saturday was the same as it had been when she'd checked it from the ferry: Partly cloudy skies, high of 77 degrees, chance of showers forty percent.

Forty percent. It bugged Margot. Forty percent could not be ignored.

"Cut the branch," she said.

Roger nodded succinctly and headed outside.

Margot had fifty million things to do, but unable to do any of them, she sat at the kitchen table. It was a rectangular table, made from soft pine. Along with everything else in the house, it had been abused by the Carmichaels. The surface held ding marks, streaks of pink magic marker, and a half moon of black scorch that came from popcorn made in a pot on a night when Doug and Beth had been out to dinner at the Ships Inn and Margot had been left to babysit her siblings.

Margot remembered her mother being distraught about the scorch mark. "Oh honey," she'd said. "You should have used a trivet. Or put down a dishtowel. That mark will never go away."

At age fourteen, Margot had thought her mother was overreacting in order to make Margot feel bad. Margot had stormed up to her room.

But her mother had been right. Twenty-six years later, the scorch mark was still there. It made Margot wonder about permanence. She had just given the okay for the tent guys to amputate Alfie, a tree that had grown in that spot for over two hundred years. That tree had been there since colonial times; it had a majesty and a grace that made Margot want to bow down. The branch would never grow back; a tree wasn't like a starfish, it didn't regenerate new limbs. Margot wondered if twenty-five years from now she would walk her grandchildren out to that tree and show them the place where the branch had been sliced off and say, "We had to cut that branch down so we could put up a tent for my sister Jenna's wedding."

Generations of their descendants would go without a tree swing in the name of this decision.

Margot heard the whine of the chainsaw. She covered her face with her hands.

Her mother hadn't written anything about the tree swing in the notebook.

*Cut Alfie's branch?* Margot asked her.

The sound of the chainsaw raised goosebumps. It felt like the guy was about to cut out Margot's own heart.

She ran out the back door.

"Stop!" she cried.

The wedding was taking on a life of its own. It was the damndest thing. A person could plan for months down to the tiniest detail, a person could hire someone like Roger and have a set of written blueprints such as their mother had left -- and still things would go wrong. Still the unexpected would happen.

"I can't let you do it," Margot said to Roger. "I can't let you cut it."

"You understand this means no tent?" Roger said.

Margot nodded. No tent. Partly cloudy, forty percent chance of showers. A hundred and fifty people, tens of thousands of dollars of tables, chairs, china, crystal, silver, floral arrangements, food and wine -- all with a forty percent chance of getting drenched. Margot fretted as she thought about the antique, hand-embroidered table linens, most of which were the same linens Margot and Jenna's grandmother had used for her wedding in this very same backyard in 1943. What if those linens got rained upon? (Their grandmother had hosted 92 guests at her wedding, under a striped canvas tent

supported by wooden poles. Back in 1943, Alfie's branches would have been younger, stronger, and higher.)

Margot knew she should confer with someone, get a second opinion: Jenna, or her father. But Margot felt that her primary duty as Maid of Honor was to shield Jenna from the treacherous obstacles that would pop up over the next seventy-two hours. On Sunday afternoon, as soon as the farewell brunch was over, Jenna would be on her own. She would have to face her life as Mrs. Stuart Graham. But until then, Margot was going to make the tough decisions. She might have called her father, but her father, obviously, had issues of his own.

Plus, Margot felt confident that no one in the Carmichael family -- not Doug, not Jenna, not Nick or Kevin -- would want to see that branch cut down.

"No tent," Margot said.

"I'll see about the smaller tent," Roger said.

"Thank you," Margot said. She paused. "I don't expect you to understand."

"Pray for sun," Roger said.

Margot was staying in "her room," sharing the double bed with Ellie, who was a flopper and a kicker. Drum Jr. and Carson would sleep in the attic bunk room with Kevin and Beanie's three boys, and their Uncle Nick -- who, if he remained true to form, wouldn't make it home to sleep at all. Jenna and Finn and Autumn were all cramming into Jenna's room which had one twin bed and one trundle bed -- this was their choice, but it was also true that neither Finn nor Autumn had wanted to share with Rhonda, who had the proper guest room -- with two double beds -- all to herself. Kevin and Beanie would sleep in Kevin and Nick's room (on the Eastlake twins) and Doug (but apparently not Pauline) would sleep in the master.

Margot hadn't texted her father back yet because she didn't know what to say and she hoped that her silence would prompt more information.

She unpacked her suitcase and Ellie's suitcase. Ellie had stuffed her suitcase with trinkets and homemade bracelets and a ball of string and a stuffed inchworm that someone had brought to the hospital the day she was born, and the tape measure from the junk drawer, and an assortment of dried-out markers and broken crayons, and a tattered paperback copy of *Caps for Sale*. Ellie, Margot realized with weary concern, was becoming a hoarder. This was probably a result of the divorce, another thing for Margot to feel guilty about. She sat on the bed, letting the broken crayons sift through her fingers. Was it too early for wine?

In the way of clothes, Ellie had packed two mismatched socks, a white t-shirt with a grape juice stain down the front, a pair of turquoise denim overalls, her black and silver Christmas dress that she'd worn to the Nutcracker last year and had complained about the whole time, her favorite purple shorts with the green belt, and a seersucker sundress embroidered with lobsters that was two sizes too small. And hallelujah -- a bathing suit. Margot should have checked Ellie's packing job -- really, who entrusted a six-year-old to pack for herself? -- but she'd been too busy. At least Margot had packed Ellie's flower girl dress and her good white sandals in her own suitcase.

Margot hung up the white eyelet flower girl dress and then her own grasshopper green bridesmaid dress, thinking, *God, I do not want to wear that.*

But she would, of course, for Jenna. And for her mother.

Grocery store, liquor store. She was racing the clock, there was no time to think about Edge, or Drum Sr. getting married, or about Griff with his kaleidoscope eyes, (a genetic anomaly formally known as *heterochromium iridium* he had told her in his first interview) and the two days of growth on his face. But the three of them were in her brain. How to exorcise them?

She took an outdoor shower under the spray of pale pink climbing roses that her mother had cultivated and that still thrived. The roses alive, her mother dead. Was the fact that Margot didn't like gardening a character flaw? Did it mean she wasn't nurturing enough?

In the worst days of their divorce, Drum Sr. had accused Margot of being a cold-hearted bitch. Was this true? If it *was* true, then why did Margot feel everything so keenly? Why did life constantly feel like being pierced by ten thousand tiny arrows?

She had been a cold-hearted bitch to Griffin Wheatley, Homecoming King. He didn't realize it, but it was true.

Guilt.

But no, there wasn't time.

Margot fed her children a frozen pizza and grapes, serving them in her bathrobe, with her hair still dripping wet.

Carson said, "Are you going out tonight?"

"Yes," Margot said.

The three of them started to squeak, squeal and whine in chorus. They hated it when Margot went out, they hated Kitty, their afternoon babysitter, they hated their afternoon activities regardless of what they were -- because they sensed that these activities were, also, babysitters, substitutes for Margot's time and attention. Margot had hoped that as they got older, they would come to see her career as one of the wonderful things about her. She was a partner at Miller, Sawtooth, she did valuable work, matching up top executives with the right companies. She had a certain amount of power, and she made a lot of money.

But power and money meant little to her twelve-year-old and even less to the nine and the six. They wanted her warm body snuggled in the bed amongst them, reading *Caps for Sale*.

"It's your auntie's wedding," Margot said. "A sitter named Emma is coming tonight and tomorrow night. Saturday is the wedding and it will be held here in the backyard, and Sunday we're going home."

"Tonight *and* tomorrow night!" Drum Jr. said. Of the three of them, he was the one who needed Margot the most. Why this was, she couldn't quite explain.

"Who's Emma? I don't know Emma!" Ellie said.

"She's nice," Margot said. "Nicer than me."

It was nearly seven and the light outside was still strong. The smaller tent had been erected and now the guys were laying the dance floor. The grass would be matted, but Roger had assured them it wouldn't die. The smaller tent looked good, Margot thought. It was bigger than she'd expected, but it wasn't big enough to shelter a hundred and fifty people. Maybe between the tent and the house. Maybe.

Forty percent chance of showers.

Emma Wilton showed up right at seven. She was a girl who Margot used to babysit, now twenty-five years old and between years of veterinary school. She and Margot hugged and then remarked on how their relationship had circled around and Margot said, "And ten or fifteen years from now, Ellie can babysit *your* kids." They laughed, and Margot excused herself for the blow dryer.

She checked her phone. Nothing from Edge. What was *wrong* with him? Margot was tempted to text, *Is everything okay?* But that might come across sounding nagging or needy -- or worst of all, wifely. Another problem with texting: It was nearly impossible to express tone. Margot wanted to let him know that she was concerned without having him think she was asking, *Why the hell aren't you texting me back?* Which was, of course, exactly what she was asking.

There was a text on her phone from Rhonda. Margot opened it eagerly, expecting more drama. It said: *My plane arrives at 8:20. What time dinner?*

Margot deflated a bit. It sounded like Rhonda was still coming. This was bad. This was, in so many ways, the worst case scenario. To have Rhonda, but no Pauline? Unthinkable. Who would Rhonda talk to, who would Rhonda hang out with, if not Pauline? There were no other Tonellis coming to the wedding, and none of Pauline's friends.

Margot typed back: *Dinner is at 8.*

Rhonda responded right away: *Who picking me up?* Rhonda always, in Margot's experience, responded right away because -- Margot suspected -- Rhonda had nothing to do but text back right away. She had no proper job, no other friends.

Margot wrote: *Pls take a cab.*

Rhonda wrote: ?

Margot looked at the question mark, then burst out laughing. Of course Rhonda had texted a question mark. She was probably wondering why Mr. Rourke wasn't picking her up in a white stretch limo.

Margot had sent a handful of detailed emails about tonight's bachelorette party to all involved. She had listed the name and address of the restaurant and the time of their dinner reservation -- 8:00 -- in each of the emails. That Rhonda had then booked a flight that landed at eight-twenty wasn't Margot's problem.

Was it?

Guilt.

But no, there wasn't time.

Although Jenna's bedroom was the smallest -- the "spinster aunt bedroom," their mother had always called it, since for decades it had belonged to Doug's spinster aunt, Lucretia -- it was also the best appointed because it had a deck that overlooked the backyard and the harbor. It was on this deck that Margot and the other maidens opened the champagne.

Autumn took charge of popping the cork, since she waited tables at a beachfront seafood restaurant in Murrell's Inlet, South Carolina. The cork sailed into the yard and Margot watched Jenna's eyes follow it as it landed in the grass.

Then Jenna said, "I guess I thought the tent would be bigger."

Autumn expertly filled four glasses, and Margot reached for one. She wanted to drink the whole thing down in one gulp, but she had to make a toast. She smiled at Jenna and Jenna smiled back. Jenna wouldn't care about the tent or about Margot making a unilateral decision about Alfie's tree branch. All Jenna cared about was Stuart, who would be arriving tomorrow with his people.

"To an amazing, wonderful...and *sunny* weekend!" Margot said.

The four of them clinked glasses.

Jenna said, "There *is* another tent going up, right? The one the people are sitting under?"

"Yes," Margot said. Drink drink drink. "Tomorrow."

"Oh," Jenna said. "I thought it was going up today."

"Nope," Margot said. Drink drink drink. "It's tomorrow."

Jenna frowned. Margot thought maybe the issue would explode right then and there. Instead, Jenna said, "I miss Stuart."

Finn was frowning also. She said, "At least he's not in Vegas, getting a *lap dance*."

Margot recalled Finn's expression on the ferry when Scott's name came up. So that was why: Vegas, lap dances, strip clubs, cocktail waitresses with large, enticing fake breasts. Margot remembered how things like that could seem threatening to a new marriage. But that kind of jealous anxiety faded away, just like everything else. At the end with Drum Sr., Margot had found herself thinking, *Why don't you go to Vegas and get a lap dance?*

Autumn said, "Lap dances are harmless. I get them all the time."

For the first time all day, something struck Margot as funny. "You get lap dances?"

"Yeah," Autumn said. "Guys love it."

"Oh," Margot said. She wondered for an instant if Edge would love it if she, Margot, got a lap dance. She decided he most definitely would not.

Autumn filled her glass with more champagne, and Margot watched the golden liquid bubble to the top. The kids were playing Frisbee with Emma in the yard below. Margot remembered when it had been her and her siblings playing in the yard, while her parents drank gin and tonics on this deck and turned up Van Morrison on the radio. Her mother used to wear a blue paisley patio dress. Margot would hug Alfie's trunk, her arms not even reaching a third of the way around. A tree wasn't a person, but if a tree *could* be a person, then Alfie would be a wise, generous, all-seeing, God-like person. She couldn't let the tent guys cut the branch. The cut would be a wound; it might get infected with some kind of mung. Alfie might die.

Margot stood up and leaned over the railing. She felt dizzy. She felt like she might drop.

"We should go," she said.

Jenna was driving.

They bounced across the cobblestones at the top of Main Street. Town was teeming with people who had come to Nantucket to celebrate summer. Margot loved the art galleries and shops, she loved the couple carrying a bottle of wine to dinner at Black Eyed Susan's, she loved the dreadlocked guy in khaki cargo shorts walking a black lab. She noticed people noticing them -- four pretty women all dressed up in Margot's Land Rover. Jenna and Finn were wearing black dresses, and Autumn was wearing green. Margot was wearing a white silk sheath with a cascade of ruffles above the knee. She loved white in the summertime. The city was too dirty to wear white -- one cab ride and this dress would be trashed.

Jenna took a right onto Broad Street, past Nantucket Bookworks and the Brotherhood and Le Languedoc, and then a left by the Nantucket Yacht Club. Margot tapped her finger on the window and said, "That's where we'll be tomorrow night!"

No one responded. Margot turned around to see Finn and Autumn pecking away at their phones. Then Margot looked at Jenna, who was skillfully navigating the streets, despite that fact that pedestrians were crossing in front of them without looking. Margot felt bad that Jenna was driving to her own bachelorette party, but she had insisted. Margot should have hired a car and driver, and then all four of them would be sitting in the back seat together. And Margot should have made a rule about no cell phones. What was it about life now? The people who weren't present always seemed to be more important than the people who were.

Margot picked her clutch purse off the floor of the car and against her better judgment, checked her phone. She had one text, from Ellie. It said: *I miss you mommy.*

Margot decided not to be disappointed that her only text was from her daughter, and she decided not to be horrified that her six-year-old knew how to text. Margot decided to be happy that someone, somewhere in the world, missed her.

When she looked up, Jenna was pulling into the restaurant parking lot. Margot knew this was the time to muster her enthusiasm and rally the troops. This group was low-energy; even Margot herself was

flagging. A glass and a half of champagne might as well have been three Ambien and a shot of Ny-Quil. If Jenna turned the car around, Margot would happily sleep until morning.

But she was the Maid of Honor. She had to do this for Jenna.

And her mother.

The Galley was a bewitching restaurant. It was the only fine dining on Nantucket located on the beach. Most of the seating was under an awning with open sides bordered by planters filled with red and pink geraniums. There were lounges and papasan chairs and tiki torches out in the sand. There was a zinc bar. The crowd was buzzing and beautiful. Over the years, Margot had seen an assortment of powerful and famous people at these tables: Martha Stewart, Madonna, Dustin Hoffman, Ted Kennedy, Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones, Robert DeNiro. The Galley was see and be seen. It was, always, on any given night, the place to be.

They were seated at a table for four in the main dining room, but in the part of the room that was closer to the parking lot. Autumn didn't sit down right away; she was scanning the surrounds. Finally, she settled in her chair. She said, "I think we should ask for a better table."

Margot felt something sinking and rising in her at the same time. Spirits sinking, ire rising. She said, "A better table, *where?* This place is packed!"

"Out in the sand, maybe," Autumn said. "Where there's more action."

Margot couldn't believe this. She'd had a hell of a time even getting *this* reservation for eight o'clock on a Thursday night in July. She had called the Tuesday after Memorial Day and had been told, initially, that the restaurant was *booked*, but that her name could be added to the wait list. And now Autumn -- the so-called restaurant professional -- was *complaining?* Insinuating that Margot hadn't been important or *insistent* enough to score a better table? It was Autumn's fault that the "bachelorette party" was being held tonight, at the very last minute, instead of weeks or months earlier, which was more

traditional. There were five people's schedules to accommodate, and Margot put forth options, all of them enticing. A ski weekend in Stowe, or a spring weekend out at the spa in Canyon Ranch. But Autumn hadn't been able to make either one. *Weekends are really hard for me*, she'd written.

Well, it was nearly impossible to plan a bachelorette party *during the week*, but Margot gave it a shot and threw together something in Boca Raton the week of Jenna's spring break from Little Minds, but again, Autumn couldn't attend, so Margot canceled.

Then Jenna told Margot she thought the real problem with Autumn was money. She was, after all, waiting tables.

Margot wondered *why* Autumn was waiting tables. She had a degree from the College of William and Mary, where she had majored in political science. She could have done anything with that -- grad school, law school, think tanks. She could have taught like Jenna, or gone into business, an internet start-up, anything. Margot was impatient with people who didn't live up to their potential. This, she supposed, was the result of having been married to Drum Sr. Drum Sr. was so unambitious, it was like he was moving backwards.

Margot ignored Autumn's dissatisfaction with their table. She asked the waiter (who was a woman, but one of the things Margot had learned over the years from Autumn was that the term 'waitress,' like the term 'actress,' was outdated) for a wine list. The wine list appeared and Margot asked Jenna, "White or red?"

Jenna waved a hand. "I don't care. Either."

Margot didn't ask Finn or Autumn for input, even though she could *feel* Autumn staring at her. Probably, Autumn wanted the wine list. Well, too bad, Margot was going to exercise her sovereign right as Maid of Honor and pick the wine.

One white, one red. Margot preferred Sancerres and Malbecs. Sancerres reminded her of Drum Sr. (he had wooed her the first summer they dated by taking her to a restaurant called the Blue Bistro --

which had since closed -- and plying her with Sancerre) and Malbecs reminded her of Edge (that night at Picholine, which she could *not* allow herself to dwell on). Margot wished she could look at a wine list and not think of men at all. She wished she could look at a wine list and think about herself.

She handed the list to Autumn. "Would you mind picking the wine?"

Autumn looked so happy that Margot immediately felt petty for denying her this tiny pleasure in the first place. "I'd love to!"

Margot leaned back in her chair and tried to relax. Jenna and Finn were talking between themselves *sotto voce*, which Margot found rude, if completely predictable. Finn seemed to still be in foul humor. She had always been petulant and spoiled. When Finn was seventeen, she had landed a job on Nantucket, nannying for the Worthington family, who were friends of Beth and Doug Carmichael. Finn had lasted thirty-six hours before she quit. She missed Connecticut, she claimed, and she missed her parents. What Finn *really* wanted was to return to Darien in order to have sex with her boyfriend, Charlie Beaudette, while her parents -- the ones she purportedly missed -- were on vacation for two weeks in the south of France. Beth and Doug had tried to talk Finn into staying -- she would outgrow her homesickness, she would have a wonderful summer -- but Finn was determined to go, and the Carmichaels were powerless to make her stay. Margot had been on Nantucket that same week and had a front row seat for the drama. Back then, Drum Jr. was less than a year old and Margot was working as an associate principal at Miller-Sawtooth. As a new mother and a placement professional, Margot determined that Finn lacked character, had no sense of responsibility, and no hustle. Margot could not abide people without hustle. Finn's inner core, Margot suspected, was as soft as a rotten banana.

Thankfully, the wine arrived, and they ordered their meals. Jenna turned to include Autumn and Margot in the conversation, although Margot couldn't keep track what they were talking about from one minute to the next. Her mind was on other things. She had ordered the crab cake to start, Autumn had the chowder, Jenna and Finn had both gotten the foie gras. Margot thought, in no particular order: It was funny the way Jenna and Finn always ordered the same thing, and they had dressed alike. Had they ever

had a fight? If so, Margot didn't know about it. They had been friends for more than twenty-five years and it had always been harmony. The summer of the nanny job, Jenna had supported Finn's decision to go home. She was the one who had confided to Margot that the real reason Finn wanted to go home was to screw Charlie Beaudette. Jenna had found it romantic -- instead of stupid, immature, and short-sighted.

Margot allowed that her bitterness regarding Finn might have been borne from jealousy. Margot herself had never had a friend the way Jenna had Finn. She had had friends, of course, some casual, some closer, but Margot and her friends had bickered and switched alliances; this had been true in high school, and then again in college. As an adult, Margot and Drum Sr. had become friends with the people whose children went to school with their children, and did the same sports and activities as their children - - which was, Margot realized, an insufficient litmus test for friendship. Few of those friendships had survived her divorce. None of the couples she and Drum used to hang out with called her for dinner parties anymore. Now, when Margot saw these people, they scheduled the children's playdates like business transactions.

If Margot needed to talk to someone, she called Jenna, or her sister-in-law, Beanie, or her father. She sometimes talked to Edge. At the start of their relationship, he had been sweet and attentive, but lately, this sweet attentiveness had dwindled. For the past four or five months, he had sounded like a man of fifty-nine who had been married and divorced three times, who had seen it all, survived it all, and could barely conceal his impatience that Margot was still in the life stage where she cared what other people thought.

Margot eyed Jenna and Finn with envy. Then she worried that the fact that she had never had a best friend was another indicator -- like the fact that she didn't garden -- that there was something wrong with her. And her marriage had failed! Was that due to some inability to connect in a meaningful and permanent way with others? *Was she a cold-hearted bitch?* Jenna would, no doubt, be just as devoted to Stuart as she was to Finn. Margot wondered if all family wedding weekends were doomed to be exercises in painful self-examination.

She turned her attention to Autumn.

Autumn had ordered the chowder, which was the least expensive thing on the menu, and Margot wondered if *that* was why she'd ordered it. Maybe Autumn really *was* financially strapped. Of course, she wasn't rich, she was waiting tables and living in a rented bungalow. At that moment, Margot decided that she would pay for dinner. She had a great job, she could afford it, she was the Maid of Honor, she would pay.

She took a bite of her crab cake. It was drizzled with a lemony sauce. More wine. She was starting to feel a little drunk, but this came as no surprise. Any time she had thought about this wedding in the past twelve months she had thought, *When I don't know what else to do, I'll get drunk. I'll just stay drunk all weekend, if need be.* And here she was.

Finn got up to use the bathroom. She hadn't even touched her foie gras and Margot eyed it covetously. Margot loved foie gras, but she hadn't ordered it because it was bad for you and it was a travesty the way they force-fed the poor French geese. But it looked so yummy -- plump and seared golden brown, topped with ruby red pomegranate seeds.

Margot noticed Jenna watching her with a concerned expression on her face. She realized that she had to tell Jenna about Alfie's tree branch; she had to tell Jenna that the second tent wasn't being erected tomorrow. The second tent wasn't being erected at all.

Forty percent chance of showers.

Margot lifted the bottle of white wine out of the ice, and found it empty. She flagged the waiter.

"Another?" she said.

Jenna bit her bottom lip, and Margot didn't like the way that looked. She wanted to ask Jenna if she was having fun. She wanted to ask Jenna if this night was memorable. It was too early to tell, they had barely started, but Margot feared it wasn't memorable enough. What could she do? Should she suggest a game? Some kind of bachelorette game? In general, Margot found bachelorette parties

distasteful -- the penis lollipops, the ludicrous sashes the bride-to-be was forced to wear, the hot pink t-shirts with lewd sayings. And at that moment, Margot realized she had forgotten to bring the hideous bow-and-paper-plate "hat" that Jenna was supposed to wear. Jenna would most definitely be thrilled that Margot had forgotten the "hat," but Margot still felt like she was failing at her Maid of Honor duties. Finn would have remembered to bring the hat.

Forty percent chance of showers. Griffin Wheatley, Homecoming King. He had taken the job at Blankstar, he was happy there. Margot could relax. No harm, no foul.

The restaurant was loud. The other tables were talking and laughing, and under all that, Bobby Darrin sang, "Somewhere, Beyond the Sea," and champagne corks popped, and knives and forks scraped plates. Margot thought of her mother, wearing the blue paisley patio dress. She had seemed like the most beautiful woman in all the world, and Jenna looked just like her.

Margot said, "Is it me, or has Finn been gone a long time?"

Jenna said, "I'm sure she's texting Scott."

"Oh," Margot said, collapsing back in her seat. She wondered if she should take her phone to the Ladies Room and check her texts. She knew the answer was no. She was determined to be present. She would eat her crab cake. She wouldn't worry about Alfie's tree branch or about what Edge was doing, or about whether or not Carson needed to repeat fourth grade or about whether it had been rude to pick such an expensive restaurant for this dinner. She wouldn't feel the weight of her age, even though it had been difficult to see Emma Wilton all grown up. A blink of an eye ago, Emma had been six and Margot had been twenty-one. Forty was too old to be a Maid of Honor, Margot thought. And yet that was what their mother had wanted.

There was a tap on Margot's shoulder. She thought it was Finn returning from the Ladies Room, or the waiter with their wine, but when she pivoted in her seat, she saw Rhonda. Rhonda Tonelli.

*Oh shit*, she thought.

Margot struggled to push her chair away from the table and stand. She thought, *What do I do? What do I say?* She'd had too much to drink to handle this graciously, but at least she was sober enough to realize that.

She said, "Hey, Rhonda!" She moved in to give Rhonda a hug and a peck on the cheek, and Rhonda bobbed away to avoid this gesture, and so Margot ended up with her hand on the side of Rhonda's neck and her lips landed on Rhonda's bare shoulder. It all happened quickly, but the embarrassing fact resonated through Margot's mind like a gong. She had kissed Rhonda's shoulder.

Oh God, awkward.

Rhonda said, "I didn't know the address of the house, so I called my mother, but she wasn't answering her phone, so then I called you, like, fifty times, and you didn't answer. So then the cab driver had pity on me -- I mean, here I am, just landed on this island and there's no one to meet me and I don't know where the hell I'm going. So we pulled out the phone book and looked up Carmichael, but there were two Carmichaels so I picked one and I was *wrong* -- the other Carmichaels were at home, I interrupted their dinner -- and then finally, I found the right house. The babysitter was there with your kids, she had no idea which room was mine, so I put my stuff in the blue room with the twin beds..."

*Kevin's room*, Margot thought.

"And thank *God* the babysitter knew where you guys were eating because I lost the email you sent me with the name of the restaurant. It was like, 'Welcome to Nantucket, Rhonda!'"

Margot laughed. She said, "Welcome to Nantucket, Rhonda!" She stood with her back to the table, hoping to disguise the fact that there was no chair for Rhonda. Margot had completely forgotten Rhonda was coming. Margot had made a reservation for five people, but when they'd arrived, the hostess had said, "Four?" And Margot had said, "Yes, please," and they were seated at a table for four.

Now, Autumn was up out of her chair, utilizing her professional skills, informing the waiter that there would be one more joining them and they needed a chair. But then Finn returned to the table, her

face streaked with tears, and Jenna hopped up to see what the matter was. In the process, she upended her red wine glass and Margot's white silk sheath dress was splattered with Burgundy, and Margot's gut reaction, which she was not quick enough to suppress, was to shriek. The dress was ruined.

Jenna said, "Oh, Margot, I'm sorry!"

Rhonda said, "White wine will get that out. Use white wine."

Autumn said, "That's a myth."

Rhonda said, "I've seen it done."

Margot watched Finn and Jenna, who were now hugging. Jenna rubbed Finn between the shoulder blades. "What happened?" she said. "What's wrong?"

The waiter came back with the fifth chair and then there was the big production of squeezing it in and moving the plates, all of them still filled with very expensive uneaten food. Then the waiter noticed the spilled wine and Margot's dress, and she ran to get fresh linens and a dishtowel and seltzer for the stains. The wine looked like blood and Finn was crying with gusto now. It probably seemed like there had been a murder at their table. Margot thought it would be best if they all sat down, and she said so.

Finn said, "I have to go home."

Margot said, "What? Why? What happened?"

Finn shook her head and pressed a streamer of toilet paper to her nose.

Jenna said, "I'll go with you."

"No!" Margot said. "You can't. This is your party!"

"Your sister's right," Finn said. "You stay. It's your party."

"Don't be absurd," Jenna said. "If you're going home, I'm going with you."

Finn cast her eyes to the ceiling in a look of mock surrender that Margot had seen a thousand times in the past 25 years. Margot thought, *You can't ask Jenna to leave her own party! Pathetic!* Finn was upset because Scott was in Las Vegas having fun. Why wasn't Finn willing to just have fun herself, here? But Margot knew there was nothing she would be able to say, no guilt trip she would be able to lay, that would make either of them change their minds.

Jenna wrapped herself in her pashmina. "I'm going to take the car," she said to Margot. "You guys can get a cab, right?"

"Right," Margot said. She smiled at Jenna, willing herself to pretend like this was all okay for the next sixty seconds, until they were out of the restaurant. "We'll see you in the morning."

Jenna returned Margot's smile and Margot saw her gratitude and relief. She kissed Margot on the cheek and said, "Thank you for understanding. I'm not feeling very fun either. I just want Stuart to get here."

"Okay," Margot said. Jenna and Finn left, and a second later, the waiter approached with the seltzer and a rag and Margot blotted the stains on her dress until she looked like a watercolor canvas. It was not okay, of course, not okay that the evening she had planned for months had been sabotaged by Scott Walker, of all people! In fact, if Margot looked back on the last six hours, nothing had been okay. If Margot let herself think about it another second, *she* might break down in tears and go home.

But no, she wouldn't capitulate. She was the Maid of Honor and that word, *honor*, meant something. She wasn't sure just what, but she knew it didn't mean going home. She had an evening to salvage.

She turned to Autumn and Rhonda. "So," she said.

They decided to move to the bar. This was Autumn's idea and it was brilliant. Instead of the three of them sitting forlornly at a table set for five, they had their wine and food moved to three stools at

the zinc bar. It was a fresh start. Margot was in the middle, with Rhonda to her right and Autumn to her left. Rhonda ordered dinner, and Autumn finished her chowder, and Margot managed to eat her crab cake, then she and Autumn split Finn's untouched foie gras. Margot began to feel a little more like a human being. She was hosting a bachelorette party without a bachelorette, but that wasn't true because both Autumn and Rhonda were bachelorettes, and for that matter, so was Margot.

Autumn and Rhonda had never met, which turned out to be a good thing because Rhonda, once she had gotten a glass of wine and taken a few deep breaths, did something Margot had never seen before: She turned on the charm.

She said, "I can't believe Jenna asked me to be a bridesmaid. I am so thrilled."

"Thrilled?" Autumn said. "Really? I agreed because I love that girl to pieces, but I wouldn't call myself thrilled."

"No," Margot said. "Me either."

"I've been a bridesmaid eleven times," Autumn said.

"How many of those couples are still married?" Margot wondered aloud.

"Eight couples still married, two divorced, one separated," Autumn said.

"More will fall," Margot predicted.

"I've never been a bridesmaid before," Rhonda said.

"You're kidding!" Autumn said. "How'd you manage to escape?"

Rhonda shrugged. "No one ever asked me."

Autumn sat with that a moment, and Margot thought, *No one ever asked you because up until ten minutes ago you presented yourself to the world as a miserable bitch.* Right? Rhonda was the same woman who had refused to eat anything other than celery sticks at Thanksgiving dinner because she was

newly vegan -- although she hadn't bothered to inform her mother of that -- and then she picked a fight with Margot's sister-in-law, Beanie, about what being a vegan actually entailed, and the whole time she had pronounced the word "veg-an," with a short "e," so that it rhymed with "Megan." Rhonda was the same woman who had gotten a flat tire in the Bronx and had called Doug up in the middle of the night begging him to come help her change it, then screamed at him for taking so long to get there, saying he was lucky she hadn't been gang-raped. Rhonda was the same woman who announced unsolicited that her body fat was a mere 4%, then asked Margot to feel her biceps, then pulled up her shirt so Margot could view her six-pack abs. Rhonda openly admitted that her favorite show was "Jersey Shore," and that she had a celebrity crush on Mike the Situation.

Margot said, "Well, I'm glad you're thrilled. It's going to be a lovely wedding."

Rhonda said, "I love the dress."

"Ha!" Autumn said. "You're kidding!"

Rhonda said, "I'm not kidding. I love it."

"Grasshopper green," Autumn said. "I'm sorry, but those two words spoken together are fingernails down a chalkboard."

Margot pressed her lips together. On the one hand, she agreed with Autumn. The color did not thrill Margot. Nor, really, did anything else about the dress. The dress was, undeniably, a *bridesmaid* dress -- silk shantung in a reptilian green, off-the-shoulder, cinched at the waist, sheath skirt to the knee. To Margot, the dress felt dated. These days, everyone got bridesmaid dresses at J. Crew or Ann Taylor, or women were given a color and then they were free to find their own dresses, ones they might actually wear again. But on the other hand, Margot was grateful that Rhonda liked the dress. The suggestion of this green had come from the Notebook. It was their mother's idea, because their mother's vision was one of an elegant woodland, all green and white. The green should be "the color of new leaves," the Notebook stated, but it had ended up as a shade the woman at the bridal salon called "grasshopper."

Reminiscent of classroom lizards and sour apple Jolly Ranchers. Their mother had also suggested dyed-to-match pumps and opera-length pearls -- and Jenna had fully subscribed to both of these things, even though Margot had advised rethinking both. Dyed-to-match pumps and pearls were fine a decade ago -- *maybe* -- but not any longer.

Margot had said, *You don't have to follow Mom's advice to the letter, Jenna. If she were alive now, even she might second guess the pearls.*

But Jenna wouldn't budge.

To Rhonda, Margot said, "I'm glad you like the dress."

Autumn said, "But just so you know, bridesmaids are *supposed* to complain about the dress. It's in the Bridesmaid Handbook."

"Handbook?" Rhonda said.

"She's kidding," Margot said.

Their entrees came, Margot's steak, Autumn's chicken, Rhonda's sole. Rhonda had obviously given up being a Megan-vegan, but Margot decided not to mention it. Why rock the boat? She sipped her wine and then drank some water. Her steak was seared on the outside and pink and juicy on the inside and it came with some kind of creamy potato thing and lemony sautéed spinach, and as Margot ate, her mood improved. She realized she was sort of glad that Jenna and Finn had left because the pressure of making sure the evening was perfect and that Jenna was having fun had been lifted.

Rhonda said, "So...I have a new boyfriend."

"Really?" Margot said. She knew next to nothing about Rhonda's personal life, but from certain things Pauline had said, Margot had gleaned that Rhonda's career was abysmal and her dating situation even worse.

"Wanna see a picture?" Rhonda whipped out her phone and scrolled to a photo of a behemoth man wearing a tight black t-shirt that showed off his oiled, rock-hard muscles. He reminded Margot of Arnold Schwarzeneger, from his body-building days. He had a full head of hair and a nice smile.

"Wow," Margot said.

"His name is Raymond," Rhonda said. "He's a trainer at my gym." She dropped her voice to a whisper. "He has an eleven-inch penis."

"*Really?*" Autumn said, perking up. "Eleven inches? You're sure you're not exaggerating? Eleven inches is BIG."

"Eleven inches," Rhonda confirmed.

Margot nodded appreciatively, guessing that Raymond and his prodigious member might be responsible for the transformation of Rhonda's personality.

"What about you, Margot? Are you dating anyone?" Rhonda asked. "You must have men all over you. You're so pretty and smart."

Smart? Margot knew Rhonda meant book smart, but when it came to men, Margot was as big an idiot as anyone else. A bigger idiot, in fact.

Before she could stop herself, Margot said, "Actually, I'm dating my father's law partner."

She sat for a second, stunned that she had spoken those words out loud. She was scandalized with herself. She looked at her glass of red wine and thought, *Damn you*. Nobody, and she meant *nobody*, knew about her and Edge -- except for her and Edge. But she found it felt cathartic to say it aloud. To finally tell someone.

"He's fifty-nine years old," she said.

"Whoa," Autumn said.

"You can't say a word," Margot said. "It's a secret." She looked at Autumn first. Autumn might whip out her phone any second and text Jenna. And then Margot looked at Rhonda, who was a bigger security threat. Rhonda, Margot knew, told her mother *everything*, and if Rhonda told Pauline about this, Pauline would most certainly tell Doug. What had Margot *done*? She had blown it. She might as well have changed her status on Facebook to read, *Dating my father's law partner* so that all 486 of her "friends" knew the truth. She had just sabotaged her relationship. If Edge knew that Margot had spilled the beans, he would end it.

Margot said, "I'm dead serious. You can't tell a soul. I'll know if you've told anyone and I will find you, and I will kill you." She was using what Drum Jr. called her "scary mom voice." This was the only weapon she had in her arsenal, and she wasn't certain it would be effective. She didn't trust either of these people.

"I won't tell," Autumn said.

"I won't tell," Rhonda said.

They sounded earnest, but Margot was forty years old and she had learned that human beings were incapable of keeping secrets. When handed a privileged piece of information, the first thing a person wanted to do was share it.

"My father would die," Margot said. Or at least, this was Edge's position. He believed that Doug would be appalled, that their friendship would be strained, and their working relationship ruined. Margot believed her father would take the news in stride. He might even be happy. Doug had *not* been fond of Drum Sr. He thought Drum Sr. was a spoiled ne'er-do-well. Doug liked and respected Edge; they had been law partners for thirty years. True, Edge's track record with women wasn't great. He was paying alimony to three wives; he had four children, the oldest of whom was thirty-six years old, and the youngest of whom was six. Audrey.

This was how Margot and Edge had ended up together: Ellie and Audrey, both six years old, had taken ballet class at Mme. Willette's studio on 82nd and Riverside. Mme. Willette's ballet school was expensive, rigorous, and impossible-to-get-into, but Margot had heard excellent things about it. Mme. Willette held her girls to high standards -- perfect posture, perfect French pronunciation, not a strand of hair escaping the bun. At the Open House, Margot had been captivated by Mme. Willette, and became determined that Ellie should study with her. She had mastered the admissions game after getting three kids into Ethical Culture and Fieldston, and she pursued the prestigious ballet class relentlessly.

And Ellie thrived under such discipline. She had quickly bonded with all of the girls in her class, and her favorite ballet friend was a tiny girl with black hair and Asiatic eyes named Audrey. Margot had glimpsed the mother a few times -- an elegant, lean woman of indeterminate ethnicity. Ellie begged for a playdate with Audrey, and she claimed that Audrey wanted a playdate with her, but the odd and awkward thing about socializing children in Manhattan was that none of the parents knew each other. And quite frankly, Margot was intimidated by Audrey's mother. She looked like she lived downtown, although it just as easily could have been Sutton Place. Margot didn't know if she was a Little Red Schoolhouse mom, or a Bank Street mom, or a Chapin mom. She might have asked, but she didn't have the energy, the *output*, required to forge any new alliances.

And then, one week, Margot went to pick up Ellie from Mme. Willette's -- and there, in the foyer, waiting for the class to be let out, was Edge Desvesnes.

"Hi!" Margot had said, her voice containing amazement and confusion. Edge was way out of context here; it was like seeing her dentist at the Union Square Greenmarket, or her childhood minister, Reverend Marlowe, at the hardware store.

Edge had turned to look at her, but she could tell he was having a hard time placing her as well.

She said, "Margot Carmichael."

"Oh my!" he said, and they embraced.

Margot had known Edge Desvesnes since she was a teenager. He and his first wife, Mary Lee, used to come to barbecues at the Carmichael house in Darien. There had been a period of time when Margot was still in braces and glasses and bad-hair-and-worse-skin when she had had a terrible crush on Edge Desvesnes. She remembered once passing hors d'oeuvres at a party that her parents were throwing. After she had served Edge, he had turned to Doug and said, "That's a beautiful girl you've got there, partner. Those eyes."

And Doug had said, "Don't I know it."

Margot had blushed hot and retreated to the kitchen. No one had ever called her 'beautiful' before. The boys in Margot's class were ruthless about her looks. That Mr. Desvesnes who was cool and funny and cute had called her 'beautiful' was enough to turn Margot's world upside-down.

Beautiful. She had looked at herself in the mirror for months after that, wondering: *Am I beautiful?* And what had he meant about her eyes?

Margot had seen Edge Desvesnes periodically in the years that followed. He came to dinner to celebrate her parents' twentieth anniversary, he pulled into the driveway to honk for Doug when they went golfing, he attended Kevin and Beanie's wedding. The last time Margot had seen Edge Desvesnes before running into him outside the dance class, was at her mother's funeral. Edge had served as a pallbearer. In Margot's memory, he had been with a woman, but Margot had been too wracked with grief and swarmed by people to notice which woman. She had heard through her father that Edge had divorced, then married, then divorced, then married -- but amidst the drama of her own life, Margot hadn't been able to keep up.

Seeing him again so unexpectedly, Margot felt as flushed as she had been at fourteen. She said, "You're not here for..."

"Waiting for my daughter," he said.

"Your daughter?" In Margot's memory, Edge had sons. Two with the first wife, one with the second, or the other way around. Did she remember hearing about a daughter?

"My youngest," he said. "Audrey."

Margot said, "Audrey is your daughter? Ellie *loves* Audrey." Margot swallowed. She thought of the Indochine beauty. "So your wife..."

"My ex."

"Oh," Margot said. "Well, I've been meaning to approach her about getting the girls together. I had no idea...I mean, I didn't know she was *your* daughter."

At that moment, the door to the studio opened and the girls filed out in graceful silence. Ellie reached for the cold water bottle in Margot's hand. Audrey wrapped her arms around Edge's waist and squeezed.

"My daughter," he said.

"Fifty-nine," Autumn said now. "That's old. That's Viagra territory."

Rhonda laughed at this.

Margot said, "Not quite."

Things had turned romantic right away. At that very first encounter, they had exchanged cell phone numbers and by that evening, Margot had a text from Edge that said, *You are a knockout, Margot Carmichael.*

And she had said, *Moi?*

Two Saturdays later, when Edge was back to pick up Audrey, they made plans to have coffee. A few days after the coffee date, they met for drinks and drinks had turned into the two of them making out on a dark street corner in Hell's Kitchen. Edge had said, "Your father would kill me if he saw us now."

And Margot said, "My father will never find out."

Those had been the words that they'd lived by; those had become the chains that strangled their relationship, made it clunky and kept it from growing. Doug could never find out.

"Whatever," Margot said now. "It's kind of a mess."

"Is he coming to the wedding?" Rhonda asked.

"Yes," Margot said. "Tomorrow."

"Well, then, we still have tonight," Autumn said. "Let's get out of here."

*That's a beautiful girl you have there, partner. Those eyes.* Margot had asked Edge if he remembered saying that.

He had shaken his head, baffled. *No*, he said.

Margot flagged the bartender for the check. "This is my treat," she said.

"Oh, Margot, come on," Autumn said. "It's too much."

"I insist," Margot said, and she could tell Autumn felt relieved.

"Thank you!" Rhonda said. "That's really generous."

Margot looked at Rhonda. Rhonda's face was fresh, smiling, sincere. This *was* the same woman who had once told Margot she bought dresses at Bergdorf's, wore them with the tags on, and then returned them the next day?

"You're welcome," Margot said. She was done trying to predict what would happen next. This wedding had taken on a life of its own.