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The Beach House
by
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Chapter One

The bike crunches along the gravel path, weaving around the potholes that could present danger to someone who didn't know the road like the back of their hand.

The woman on the bike raises her head and looks at the sky, sniffs, smiles to herself. A foggy day in Nantucket, but she has lived here long enough to know this is merely a morning fog, and the bright early-June sunshine will burn it off by midday, leaving a beautiful afternoon.

Good. She is planning lunch on the deck today, is on her way into town via her neighbour's house, where she has spent the last hour or so cutting the large blue mophead hydrangeas and stuffing them into the basket on the front of the bike. She doesn't really know these neighbours – so strange to live in the same house you have lived in for forty- five years, a house in a town where once you knew everyone, until one day you wake up and realize you don't know people any more – but she has guessed from the drawn blinds and absence of cars they are not yet here, and they will not miss a couple of dozen hydrangea heads.

The gate to their rear garden was open, and she had heard around town they had brought in some

super-swanky garden designer. She had to look. And the pool had been open, the water was so blue, so inviting, it was practically begging her to strip off and jump in, which of course she did, her body still slim and strong, her legs tan and muscled from the daily hours on the bike.

She dried off naturally, walking naked around the garden, popping strawberries and peas into her mouth in the kitchen garden, admiring the roses that were just starting, and climbing back into her clothes with a contented sigh when she was quite dry.

These are the reasons Nan has come to have a reputation for being slightly eccentric. A reputation she is well aware of, and a reputation she welcomes, for it affords her freedom, allows her to do the things she really wants to do, the things other people don't dare, and because she is thought of as eccentric, exceptions are always made.

It is, she thinks wryly, one of the beautiful things about growing old, so necessary when there is so much else that is painful. At sixty-five she still feels thirty, and on occasion, twenty, but she has long ago left behind the insecurities she had at twenty and thirty, those niggling fears: that her beauty wasn't enough, not enough for the Powell family; that she had somehow managed to trick Everett Powell into marrying her; that once her looks started to fade, they would all realize she wasn't anyone, wasn't anything, and would then treat her as she had always expected when she first married into this illustrious family . . . as nothing.

Her looks had served her well. Continue to serve her well. She is tall, skinny and strong, her white hair is glossy and sleek, pulled back in a chignon, her cheekbones still high, her green eyes still twinkling with amusement under perfectly arched brows.

Nan's is a beauty that is rarely seen these days, a natural elegance and style that prevailed throughout the fifties, but has mostly disappeared today, although Nan doesn't see it, not any more.

Now when she looks in the mirror she sees the lines, her cheeks concave under her cheekbones, the skin so thin it sometimes seems that she can see her bones. She covers as many of the imperfections as she can with make-up, still feels that she cannot leave her house without full make-up, her trademark scarlet lipstick the first thing she puts on every morning, before her underwear even, before her bath.

But these days her make-up is sometimes patchy, her lipstick smudging over the lines in her lips, lines that they warned her about in the eighties, when her son tried to get her to stop smoking, holding up photographs in magazines of women with dead, leathery skin.

'I can't give up smoking,' she would say, frowning. 'I enjoy it too much, but I promise you, as soon as I stop enjoying it, I'll give it up.'

The day is yet to come.

Thirty years younger and she would never have dared trespass, swim naked in an empty swimming pool without permission. Thirty years younger and she would have cared too much what people thought, wouldn't

have cut flowers or carefully dug up a few strawberry plants that would certainly not be missed, to replant them in her own garden.

But thirty years younger and perhaps, if she had dared and had been caught, she would have got away with it. She would have apologized, would have invited the couple back for a drink, and the husband would have flirted with her, would have taken the pitcher of rum punch out of her hand and insisted on pouring it for her as she bent her head down to light her cigarette, looking up at him through those astonishing green eyes, flicking her blonde hair ever so slightly and making him feel like the most important man in the room, hell, the only man in the room, the wife be damned.

Thirty years younger and the women might have ignored her, but not, as they do now, because they think she's the crazy woman in the big old house on the bluff, but because they were threatened, because they were terrified that she might actually have the power to take their men, ruin their lives. And they were right.

Not that she ever did.

Not back then.

Of course there have been a few affairs, but Nan was never out to steal a man from someone else, she just wanted some fun, and after Everett died, after years of being on her own, she came to realize that sometimes sex was, after all, just sex, and sometimes you just had to take it where you could find it.

* * *

The village of Siasconset, known to all simply as Sconset, is burning with a bright morning light by the time Nan arrives on her bike. She cycles past the Sconset café, round the corner past the Book Store that isn't a book store but sells liquor instead, and hops off to go to the general store to get some food.

All the way at the back there is still a refrigerator stuffed full of yoghurt, milk, eggs – the bare essentials of life – but the rest of the store is taken up with gourmet foods, sesame crackers, delicious sweetmeats, and with designer candles and the necessary wall of T-shirts, baseball caps and tote bags advertising that the tourists had been to Sconset for a vacation, were wealthy enough to afford to come to a place where billionaires play.

As always, she heads to the back, nodding at the tourists, waving hello to the woman behind the cash register.

She is a familiar sight in Sconset, her long linen skirts floating behind her as she cycles along on a rusty old Schwinn. It is not a bike you often see these days, with its huge oversized basket on the front, but it is the one that she and Everett bought when they spent their first summer here, back in 1962, when she was twenty, and he'd brought her home to Windermere to meet his parents.

Nan cycles slowly, one hand lightly balanced on the handlebar, the other wielding a cigarette. She waves at everyone she passes, greets them with a smile, stopping to chat if the whim takes her, or if she sees a neighbour busy in the garden.

Most wave back, but more and more often she is noticing the change in the people around here, the people who don't wave back, who pretend they don't see the crazy blonde lady on the old bicycle, the people who are so bright and shiny, so clean and perfect as they walk down Main Street tapping on their iPhones, it almost hurts to look at them.

This wouldn't have happened had she been thirty years younger, she thinks from time to time, when yet another young, glamorous New York couple hesitate as she approaches them, weaving wildly on her bike as she attempts to light her cigarette without stopping. Thirty years ago he would have pulled a lighter out of his pocket and lit it for her, instead of turning when his wife prods him, sneering with distaste, as Nan's cigarette lights and the smoke wafts, as if planned, right under the woman's nose. She coughs dramatically, and Nan happily gives her the finger as she cycles off, while the woman gasps in horror and attempts to shield the eyes of the toddler who is with them.

What has happened to *people*, Nan thinks as she traverses the cobblestones. When did we become so *precious*? A family of six pass her, father, mother, then four little ones, like four little ducklings with sparkly aerodynamic helmets on. When did our children have to wear helmets, she thinks, turning her head to watch them wobble into the distance. When did we all become so scared?

She thinks of Michael, at seven, falling off the monkey bars and splitting his head open on the con-

crete ground. She didn't panic, it was just one of the things that happened to everyone. She bundled him in the front of the car and drove him to Dr Grover's house where he was stitched up in the Grovers' kitchen as Mrs Grover served them lemonade and ginger snaps.

She never knew where Michael was when he was growing up. Someone had a boat on the marshes, and Michael and his friends once got stranded for the day. Nan only knew when they ran in the kitchen door, shrieking with excitement at what swiftly became their near-death adventure. Whatever adults were around smiled affectionately, one ear on the conversation, the other somewhere else, because life, in those days, revolved around the adults. Not around the children.

*

The first time Everett brought her to their summer house, Nan had no idea what she was letting herself in for. She had barely heard of Nantucket. Had vacationed only on the Jersey Shore, knowing little of what she later came to think of as 'old America' – the true Yankee families, the old-money families, whose ancestors had sailed over on the *Mayflower*, and who could trace their families back hundreds of years.

Her own parents had been English, had sailed to New York hoping for a better life than the one they left behind in Birmingham, and had moved to Ossining because of a distant cousin who lived there.

She had been this naive little girl, still known to all as Suzanne, who hadn't known what to expect when

Everett brought her home. There was no Googling to find out about the Powells, no one who could have told her the family was famous in Massachusetts for funding the majority of the renovation that has made Cape Cod what it is today, no one who could have explained the money she was marrying into, the privilege and history that came with the Powells.

She married Everett because she thought she loved him, and as a wedding present his parents bought them an apartment in New York City. Nothing fancy, she would say years later, but it was utterly fancy, and for the first two years of their marriage Nan would wake every morning and think she had died and woken up in a Grace Kelly movie.

And nowhere did she feel this more than at Windermere. Built in the 1920s, just off Baxter Road in the village of Sconset, it stood high on a bluff, overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, its shingles grey and weary from being buffeted by the wind, but its lines graceful and elegant, the porches, in the old days, always abuzz with people.

Not a huge house, Windermere now sat on nine perfect acres. Originally a modest saltbox, over the years various careful additions had turned it into a stylish estate. The developers had started to circle, like vultures looking for their kill. The house would be torn down, Nan knew, if she ever let them get their hands on it, and it was a place that held too many important memories for her to let it go that easily.

It was the Powells' summer house – their idyllic

retreat from Memorial Day to Labour Day each year – a home filled with naked children, clambakes on the beach, and so much joy.

It was one of those naked children who caused her name change, that very first trip. ‘It’s Suzanne,’ Everett kept saying to the little three-year-old – someone’s daughter, or cousin, or something – who kept trying to drag her off to build another sandcastle. ‘I want Nan to come,’ the little girl kept saying, and Everett had laughed, so handsome then, his blue eyes crinkling in his tanned face. ‘Nan,’ he said, turning to Suzanne. ‘Nan in Nantucket. I like it.’ And since that time she had only ever been called Nan, had mostly forgotten her given name; she often found herself crossing out Nan when filling in forms that requested her full name, only realizing at the end that she hadn’t written Suzanne.

When Nan thinks back to those early days at Windermere, she can almost hear the tinkling of drinks being poured and the musicians playing, she can almost see the fairy lights strung up around the house, the lanterns hanging from the trees, people laughing and drinking and dancing all night.

There were dinner parties that went on all night, Everett’s parents – Lydia and Lionel – the first to lead their guests through the dunes for their notorious midnight swims, the shrieks from the guests as they hit the cold water audible almost in the centre of town.

Friends were always coming to stay, often not leaving for entire summers at a time, but Windermere

was big enough, and the overspill could always stay in one of the four cottages on the far edges of the compound.

Two of the cottages were sold off after Lionel died and Lydia developed Alzheimer's. Lydia eventually went into a nursing home in Boston and Nan tried to visit her there as often as she could, sometimes bringing her son until it became too painful, towards the end, when Lydia wasn't even a shadow of her former self but a tiny, shrunken, white-haired old lady, whom Nan once walked straight past when she went to visit.

Everett had died by that time, or, as Nan put it for so many years, had gone. She had woken up one morning and the bed had been empty, which was not particularly unusual – he would often wake up and go for an early morning swim – but it wasn't until he failed to return that her heart quickened with a trace of anxiety.

She went down to the beach, and still she remembers that she knew, knew from the moment she turned over and saw his side of the bed empty, that there was something not quite right.

His T-shirt was roughly folded, weighted down by his father's watch. No note. Nothing. And the sea was particularly rough that day. Nan had stood and looked out over the waves, listening to the ocean crash around her as a tear rolled down her cheek. She wasn't looking for him, she knew he had gone.

She just didn't know why.

It turned out to be no coincidence that Everett's

grandfather had won Windermere in a poker match. Gambling, it transpired, skipped a generation and landed quite solidly on the shoulders of Everett.

Nan knew he loved his poker games, but had no idea they were anything other than fun, anything other than a reason to spend a night out with the boys, drink a few single malts and smoke a few cigars, or whatever it was they did.

But after he died, all those years ago, she received phone calls from the banks, then from various people to whom he clearly owed money, and, finally, from his accountant.

‘It does not look good,’ he had said.

Luckily, there were assets. The two remaining cottages on the edges of Windermere were sold, and then, a few years later, the New York City apartment. A big decision, but she had always loved Windermere, had loved the thought of making it a permanent home, and Michael was young enough that she thought he would benefit from a quieter life, a life that was simple, in a place they had always adored. It was in the late seventies, and she got so much money for the apartment she thought she would be fine forever.

‘I leave it in your hands,’ she had said to her stockbroker with a laugh, knowing that a pot that sizeable would be fine.

*

Nan doesn’t have a stockbroker any more. Stockbrokers used to be revered, but she doesn’t know

anyone who calls themselves a stockbroker these days. These days she hears the summer people use phrases like M & A, bond derivatives and, perhaps more than anything, hedge funds. She still doesn't understand what a hedge fund is, knows only that the people who are building the biggest houses on the island, the husbands who fly in for the weekend in private jets and helicopters, joining wives, nannies and housekeepers, all seem to work in hedge funds.

She has her money in a hedge fund herself. Every month she receives a statement, but mostly she forgets to open it. Her mail has a tendency to pile up on a kitchen counter before being swept away into a cupboard somewhere, for Nan has no patience for the prosaic – bills bore her, and the only envelopes that are opened and responded to immediately are hand-written, and personal.

Today her financial advisor is coming for lunch, although Nan thinks of him less as a financial advisor and more as a friend. Not that he is much of either – she has not seen him in person for four years, and he doesn't advise her particularly, other than to have told her, all those years ago, that the hedge fund she subsequently invested in was a good one, started by one of the brightest traders at Goldman Sachs, and would be a wonderful place for her to put some money.

The phone is ringing when she walks in. She dumps the hydrangeas in the sink, and grabs the phone, running the water as she picks up.

‘Hi, Mom.’ It’s Michael, ringing, as he so often does, on his way to work.

‘Hi, my love. How are you?’

‘Tired. It’s hot and muggy and revolting in the city. I’m deeply jealous of you on the island – is it beautiful?’

‘Not yet.’ Nan smiles. ‘But it will be. Why don’t you come out? I miss you. It’s too quiet here with just me rattling around.’

‘What about Sarah? Do you still have Sarah?’

‘She still comes once or twice a week to help me out,’ Nan says, ‘and I love having her around, but I miss my family, miss this house ringing with the sounds of people having fun. Remember when you used to come up here with all your friends for the summer? Remember how much fun it was? Why don’t you come up with some people? Wouldn’t they all kill for a vacation on Nantucket?’

Michael laughs. His mother never changes. ‘They would undoubtedly kill for a vacation on Nantucket, if only they could take the time off work. And most of them are married now, with kids. It’s different. They can’t just sweep their families up and bring them out.’

‘But why ever not?’ Nan is genuinely perplexed. ‘I adore children, this is the perfect place for children.’

‘I know that, but it’s just . . . hard. People are busy, everyone’s running all the time. But I would love to come. I’d love to see you. I can’t make it up at the moment, the bosses are away for another week or so and I need to be here, but maybe I can come at the end of the summer.’

Nan turns off the tap and reaches for a cigarette.

‘Oh Mom. You’re not still smoking.’

Nan ignores him. ‘How are things going with the girl . . . what’s her name? Aisling?’

Michael smiles. ‘Interesting. I like her. Still very early days but so far so good. She’s fiery. Independent. You’d like her.’

‘I’d love to meet her.’ Nan is careful not to ask too much. ‘Bring her.’

‘Maybe I will. What are you up to today?’

‘Making lunch. Andrew Moseley is coming.’

‘Your financial advisor?’

‘Exactly!’

‘Is everything okay?’

‘Why wouldn’t it be?’

‘It seems unusual for him to travel up to see you.’

Nan shrugs. ‘I think, after four years, it’s probably just due. Anyway, lovely to have some company. I’m making delicious salads straight from the garden, and Sarah has promised to drop off a lobster salad she made yesterday.’

‘Sounds yummy.’ Michael instantly pictures the table set on the deck, his mother’s ballet slippers kicked off as she curls her legs under her after lunch, cradling a large tumbler of white wine in one hand, a ubiquitous cigarette in the other. ‘Don’t drink too much.’

Michael says goodbye with a sad smile, clicking his phone shut as he reaches his bike which is chained to a lamp post outside his apartment on 94th and

Columbus. As he does so he is unaware of the admiring glance he's given from a tall blonde walking her dog.

Michael has always been unaware of his appeal, taken for granted his large green eyes, inherited from his mother, his easy smile, his all-American clean-cut looks.

At forty-two he looks much like the college football player he used to be, tanned and rangy, and utterly comfortable in his skin.

He undoes the lock and secures his helmet, slipping the phone into his backpack and weaving off down Columbus, making a mental note to phone Sarah, just to make sure that Mom is okay, to make sure that someone is looking out for her, that she isn't quite as alone as she sounds.

Chapter Two

‘Tell me about how you met.’ Dr Posner leans back in his chair and looks over at them, sitting at opposite ends of the sofa, the elegant brunette tucked awkwardly into the corner, twisting a strand of her shoulder-length bob nervously as she darts glances towards her husband who sits still, staring at the floor.

The husband is slim, dark-haired, with coal-black eyes that occasionally rise to meet Dr Posner’s, eyes filled with sadness and pain.

They are a handsome couple. She early to mid-thirties, he early forties, Dr Posner guesses. She wears printed Capris, ballet slippers, a crocodile purse at her feet and a cashmere wrap bundled on her lap in case the air-conditioning gets too strong. The husband is in jeans and a polo shirt; he is clean-cut, darkly good-looking with a light spring tan and a body that shows he goes to the gym at least four times a week.

They look as though neither of them has ever had a problem in their lives. Young, fit, beautiful, what could possibly be wrong? Although, of course, Dr Posner knows better.

Why else would they be here?

‘Tell me why you fell in love,’ Dr Posner says,

watching how the man shifts nervously. ‘Tell me what brought you together.’

Bee looks over at Daniel, and as he meets her eye they both smile slightly, and Bee begins to talk.

‘I was doing a house share in the Hamptons,’ Bee says, her eyes misting a little at the memory. ‘It was this house that had looked wonderful in the pictures, but once we got there it had basically been trashed by the people before us —’

‘It was a wonderful pool, though,’ Daniel interjects, and Bee nods with a smile.

‘It was.’

‘So, you were both in the house together?’ Dr Posner asks.

‘No.’ Bee shakes her head. ‘Daniel was staying a couple of houses away, but it wasn’t a house share, he was with family friends.’

‘I was horrified at the house shares.’ Daniel grins properly, for the first time since walking in. ‘All these people drinking and partying, everyone single, all looking around frantically to see if someone better had just walked through the door.’

‘And you weren’t?’ Dr Posner looks at Daniel.

‘No. That scene has never been my thing. My parents had these friends who had a house in Amagansett and they were away for the summer and said we could use it.’

‘They knew they could trust Daniel.’ Bee laughs. ‘Anyone else would have trashed it in a day, but Daniel

spent all day walking around with a vacuum in one hand and a broom in the other, scouring the floors for stray grains of sand.'

Daniel shrugs as he laughs, as if to say, she knows me so well.

'You're fastidious?' Dr Posner asks.

'He's a clean freak,' Bee says. 'He's the only man I know who makes the bed every morning and does all the laundry.'

Dr Posner smiles. 'He sounds like the kind of man most women dream about.'

Neither of them says anything, and there is a pause.

'Do you mind him being a clean freak?' Dr Posner asks eventually.

Bee laughs, but it's forced. 'Are you kidding? As you said, he's amazing. All my friends are jealous because he does all the washing-up, everything.'

'I can't help it,' Daniel shrugs. 'I get anxious if I'm surrounded by mess or dirt.'

'Let's go back to the beach house,' Dr Posner guides them. 'Tell me how the two of you actually met.'

'He was playing volleyball on the beach with some of the guys from the house. They were all pretty awful. You would think that out of ten guys in a house share at least one of them would have been nice, but even the ones who looked cute were just assholes. My friend Deborah and I decided to have a glass of wine at the beach, and then we noticed Daniel and his friend because, obviously, they were strangers, but also they were cute.'

As she continues talking, both of them begin to relax, their bodies sinking into the sofa, their voices growing more animated as they smile, interrupt one another, remember what life was like when it was simple, when there was nothing to worry about. When they weren't sitting at opposite ends of a leather sofa in a psychiatrist's office because neither of them is sure their marriage is going to make it.

'Daniel, did you notice Bee?'

'It was difficult not to.' Daniel grins. 'She was wearing a hot-pink bikini, and she kept smiling at me every time I looked at her.'

'So you were attracted to her?'

'I . . . yes. She was gorgeous. Of course.'

*

Had Daniel been attracted to Bee? Even now he doesn't know the answer to this. She was gorgeous, it was true. He remembers all the other men trying desperately to get Bee to notice them, but Bee didn't seem to have eyes for anyone other than Daniel.

He hadn't understood it. He wasn't looking for romance, had recently ended a four-year relationship with Nadine, whom he had loved, had been perfectly happy with, but she was the same age as him, thirty, and was desperate to marry him – or, at least, desperate to marry someone.

He loved her, but he hadn't wanted to marry her, hadn't wanted to make that sort of commitment, and eventually, after months of arguing, Nadine had issued

the ultimatum that he had expected all along, and they had split up.

He knew Nadine hated him for it. She never believed he wouldn't come back. She thought that he would realize what he had only when it was gone, and would come crawling back on his knees, diamond ring in hand. But he hadn't. He couldn't. He felt safe in a relationship, but marriage was terrifying to him. He couldn't do it.

'It's because she's the wrong one,' his friends would say. 'When it's right, it's right.' But he had a nagging suspicion that, for him, that wasn't the case. That Nadine was possibly as right as it got, but that there was something wrong with *him*.

The holiday in Amagansett was supposed to have been a welcome break. He and Steve went there with cases of books, a leather-bound backgammon set and plans to play tennis every day.

He wasn't thinking about Nadine, or about anyone else. He was hoping to immerse himself in relaxation, and stay as far away from the burgeoning Hampton scene as he could.

But Bee had drawn him out, or perhaps she had drawn him in. Women like Bee didn't look at men like Daniel. Not that Daniel was unattractive, but he was . . . understated. He was sensitive, quiet. He liked parties that were small and intimate, where you could connect with people, hear one another's thoughts, not parties with roaring music, meat markets where you couldn't hear one another think.

He and Bee should have been chalk and cheese, Bee loving loud parties, loud music, surrounding herself with friends; but she also loved conversation, was thoughtful and curious, with an energy and vivacity that he had never encountered, that made him feel, for perhaps the first time, truly alive.

Bee made everything fun. She was extrovert, glamorous, always laughing. Daniel suddenly understood how opposites could attract, and if someone like Bee could want someone like him, how could he refuse? What must it say about him that someone as great as Bee, someone that every man wanted, only wanted him? He must be better than he thought. And it was true: when he was with Bee, he felt like a king.

So Daniel was seduced into a relationship, and once he was there it felt safe – safer, certainly, than being single. Another four years went by during which time they fell into a predictable routine, living together at Bee's Upper East Side apartment, meeting friends for brunches and lunches and dinners, spending weekends in Central Park, or back in the Hamptons, until one night when Bee had been bitchy all evening.

'What's the matter with you?' he asked. 'Is your period coming?'

'God, that's what it is!' she said, jumping off the bed and going out into the hallway then into the tiny bathroom. 'I knew I'd been feeling off.'

But her period hadn't come, and when she checked her diary it seemed she had made a mistake with the timing. Either that, or her period was two weeks late.

A couple of months previously she had had a pregnancy scare, and she had bought a double pack of First Response. There was one left. Bee reached to the back of the medicine cabinet and pulled it out, calmly and quietly, knowing instantly, before the deep-pink line appeared, that she was pregnant.

She looked at herself in the mirror and a smile spread across her face. Bee hadn't even known she had wanted a baby just yet, and certainly hadn't consciously premeditated this as a means to trap Daniel. She had heard many times about the ultimatum Nadine had issued and wasn't about to make the same mistake. But although only in her mid-twenties, all around her Bee's friends were starting to have babies, her social life had become babyville, and she'd known that eventually she would want what her friends had – a big wedding and a honeymoon in the Bahamas, a baby and a house in Connecticut.

But at that moment Bee realized that she wanted the rest of her life now, and if it didn't happen in the order in which she had always dreamed, well so be it.

She came out of the bathroom clutching the stick behind her back, a secret smile on her face. 'What's the matter?' Daniel said, but he already knew, the fear was already in his eyes, disconcerting Bee only a little as she held the stick up for him to see.

Daniel started hyperventilating.

'It will be fine,' Bee said later, nestling in the crook of his arm in bed and ignoring his earlier reaction. Of course he was bound to react badly, she thought.

They'd never discussed children before, or certainly not in anything other than the abstract, and it was bound to take a little time to get used to.

But get used to it he would. Bee was, is, a woman who is used to getting what she wants. Daniel has always said she is strong enough for both of them, and it is true. When Bee sets her sight on something it is rare for her not to get it, and she had set her sights on Daniel from the very first moment she laid eyes on him.

Stella was the flower girl at their wedding. At eighteen months old, she clutched at her mother's Vera Wang skirts and her father looked down adoringly as the minister pronounced them man and wife, acknowledging, with humour and a pointed look at Bee's pregnant stomach, that perhaps they had misunderstood the natural order of things.

Daniel hadn't expected to fall in love the way he had the moment Stella was placed in his arms in the delivery room. He looked down at her red, scrunched-up face, and he felt his heart almost literally explode.

And then along came Lizzie, and despite his fears that he could never love another child as much as he loved Stella, his heart expanded to fit them both.

Daniel still wakes up every morning excited about seeing his girls. He has been known to wake them up early, leaving Bee fast asleep, just so he can have some alone time with them before he goes to work, sitting at the kitchen table as they eat their cereal and asking

them very seriously about their thoughts on school, friends, life.

It is his love for the girls that keeps him going, for together they are the light of his life, and if that life doesn't feel quite right, if he doesn't feel the way he thinks he ought to feel for Bee, it is comfortable, and easy, and what, after all, is the alternative?

When Lizzie was one, and Stella three, they moved out of the city into a pretty 1940s cottage in Weston, Connecticut. For a while Daniel commuted into the city, but his work was going well and after a year or so he started developing property in Norwalk, and soon they were able to move into a big new house they built themselves in Westport. They should have been happy. Bee certainly seemed to be happy; she had thrown herself into the children's school, the PTA and various organizations, and forever seemed to be seeing this one for lunch and that one for a meeting, arranging play dates and dinners, and organizing trunk shows in the spectacular great room in their new house.

While Bee was keeping busy, Daniel found that he couldn't stop running, and for a long time he thought that no one was noticing, thought that no one realized he wasn't happy.

Daniel honestly thought that if he filled up his life with distractions, he wouldn't have to face the truth. And the truth was that he adored his girls more than anything in the world, and he loved Bee.

But this marriage wasn't right.

* * *

Bee had been his best friend, but there was little left. He felt, more often than not, that they were two ships passing in the night, occasionally making contact, not because of passion but because of duty, because he didn't know how to say no, because there were only so many nights you could come home late and walk up the stairs with a heavy heart, praying she would be asleep.

He hadn't wanted to get married, but he had been persuaded to, and he had hoped that even though it wasn't what he wanted, perhaps if he ran fast enough, long enough, he would find that he had reached the end of the road and it had all turned out okay.

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Couples' counselling. It was Bee's idea, and not the first time. They have, twice before, gone into therapy, both individually and jointly, and although Daniel has never been able to fully open up, and even though both times were short-lived, somehow they managed to recover something of their equilibrium and carry on with their marriage as if they were happy.

Bee started seeing a therapist soon after they met. She had baggage, she said, and it was so liberating, so useful to be able to have an hour to herself every week, to talk about anything she wanted, to be able to think clearly, speak clearly, process her thoughts and figure out the answers.

He was never sure what the questions were, but Bee seemed happier, and although Daniel had always

thought therapy was for the seriously self-indulgent, he indulged her.

At first, Bee had merely talked about how wonderful she found it, but soon she started gently suggesting that perhaps Daniel should go and see someone, that even though he claimed not to believe in it, therapy would help him open up, help him realize his full potential.

‘I don’t want to realize my full potential,’ Daniel had groaned, all those years ago. ‘I’m perfectly happy as I am.’

Bee thought this wasn’t possible. He was, she would say when they were arguing, the most closed person she had ever met. He never connected emotionally, she would say, it was like talking to someone through a steel wall. ‘I can help you,’ she insisted, and then she began to plead with Daniel to let her help him. And after a while he grew tired of saying no, so he agreed to see someone.

Not the same therapist as Bee, that would have felt almost incestuous, but another partner in the practice. He went a handful of times. Talked a little about his childhood, talked a little about his relationship with Bee, and started cancelling when his initial effort seemed to appease Bee, and she accepted that he’d made the effort and that was enough.

This time they have been seeing Dr Posner for four months. They ought to be getting better. The last time they tried couples’ counselling it was three years previously, when they saw a man and a woman who had

been recommended by a friend of Bee's, who had neglected to mention that they practised client-centred therapy, therefore didn't speak, merely reflected statements back to Bee and Daniel.

'He never supports me,' Bee would say. 'He's always busy doing something, he's always distracted and he never listens to me.'

There would be a long silence as they both looked hopefully at the husband and wife therapists, and eventually one of them would say, 'So you feel unsupported. Daniel is distracted and doesn't listen?'

'Yes.'

And the silence would continue until finally Bee, or Daniel, would get the giggles, and they would invariably leave the office shaking with laughter, which may not have been the desired effect, but certainly served to bring them close enough to quit the sessions after two months.

Dr Posner is different. They have a dialogue. He started by simply asking questions, but soon offered solutions, had a depth of knowledge that Daniel was surprised, and impressed by.

Under other circumstances, he imagines he and Dr Posner would be friends. As it is, he feels as if he shows up every Wednesday morning in preparation for an attack. He meets Bee there, neither of them having talked about it in the morning at all, and squashes himself as far away from Bee as possible as she criticizes everything about him.

And the worst part is, she's right. He is distracted.

He is busy. He doesn't want to do things with her. He doesn't compliment her. He isn't kind, or loving, or affectionate, except when it comes to his daughters, where his heart knows no bounds.

Bee is right about everything, and so every Wednesday, when the assaults come, there is little he can say; he shrugs, giving an acknowledgement that she is right. If he had the courage, perhaps he could say that he is everything she says because – oh and this is so painful to think about, something he tries to push to the back of his head – because he doesn't love her. Loves her as the mother of his children, but doesn't love her in the way he had always expected to love his life partner.

He can't say that. Can't possibly cause this much pain. And a future without his daughters is not something he can contemplate. There are times, particularly in the middle of the night, when Daniel wakes up feeling as if he is suffocating. He knows sleep is not an option on these nights, and he goes upstairs to his office, breathing deeply to try to stay calm, grabbing a newspaper or book to try to take his mind off his fear.

So he sits in Dr Posner's office, in a studio over the garage, week after week, too frightened to face a reality that will change his life forever, withdrawing more and more, terrified that if he tells the truth he will never find his way back to the only life he has ever known.

Today Daniel isn't prepared. He is prepared for the usual attack, but is in no way prepared for Dr Posner's question.

‘So how are things between you physically?’ Dr Posner crosses his legs and looks from husband to wife nonchalantly, as if he is asking how was their morning, rather than a question about one of the most intimate areas of their lives.

Daniel can’t look at Bee, he colours ever so slightly at the question and hears her snort, looks up to see her shaking her head derisively.

‘Bee?’ Dr Posner says questioningly, seeing he has more hope of getting information out of Bee.

‘Do you mean sex?’ Bee’s voice is small, as Daniel continues to shrink into the other end of the leather sofa, his own legs crossed away from Bee, his arms folded protectively over his chest, his entire body language screaming that he would rather be anywhere other than here. ‘I don’t remember,’ she says at last, looking over at Daniel. ‘When was the last time, Daniel? Nine months ago? Ten? Longer? I’ve given up counting.’

‘Daniel?’ Daniel is mortified to be even discussing this, but at least he sees there is no expression in Dr Posner’s eyes, no hint of judgement.

‘It’s true.’ He shrugs, as if it doesn’t matter.

‘And why is it that you haven’t had physical relations in nine or ten months?’ He is asking Daniel, but Daniel can’t find the words so Bee answers for him, and the pain in her voice is palpable.

‘He will say he’s too tired.’ Her voice is almost a whisper. ‘He will fall asleep while I’m in the bathroom brushing my teeth, and if I try to initiate he will brush

me off or say he's too tired, or he has an important meeting in the morning and has to have an early night.'

'And who does initiate it?'

'Always me,' Bee says. 'It always has been, but in the beginning it wasn't a problem. I mean, I knew he didn't have a huge libido. It was one of the things I liked, that he wasn't constantly trying to grab me, that it wasn't all about sex – but to never want it? To never initiate it? It makes me feel ugly.' Her eyes start to well. 'I feel useless, and ugly, and incapable as a woman and as a wife. I feel rejected.'

There is a long silence, punctuated only by the soft sounds of Bee crying. Dr Posner pushes a box of tissues over to her and looks at Daniel, waiting, while Daniel looks at the floor.

'How do you feel about this?' Dr Posner asks eventually.

'Horrible,' Daniel says. But he can't say more. Can't say that he looks at his wife's body and feels a shiver of revulsion, that when they do make love he is only able to perform by closing his eyes and losing himself in a fantasy. How could he possibly say these words out loud? How could he possibly say this in front of Bee when he knows it would destroy her?