

*bestselling author of* HIDDEN PICTURES



~~THE LAST ONE~~

~~AT THE~~

~~WEDDING~~

*a novel*

~~JASON~~

~~REKULAK~~

THE  
LAST ONE  
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WEDDING

*A Novel*

JASON REKULAK



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[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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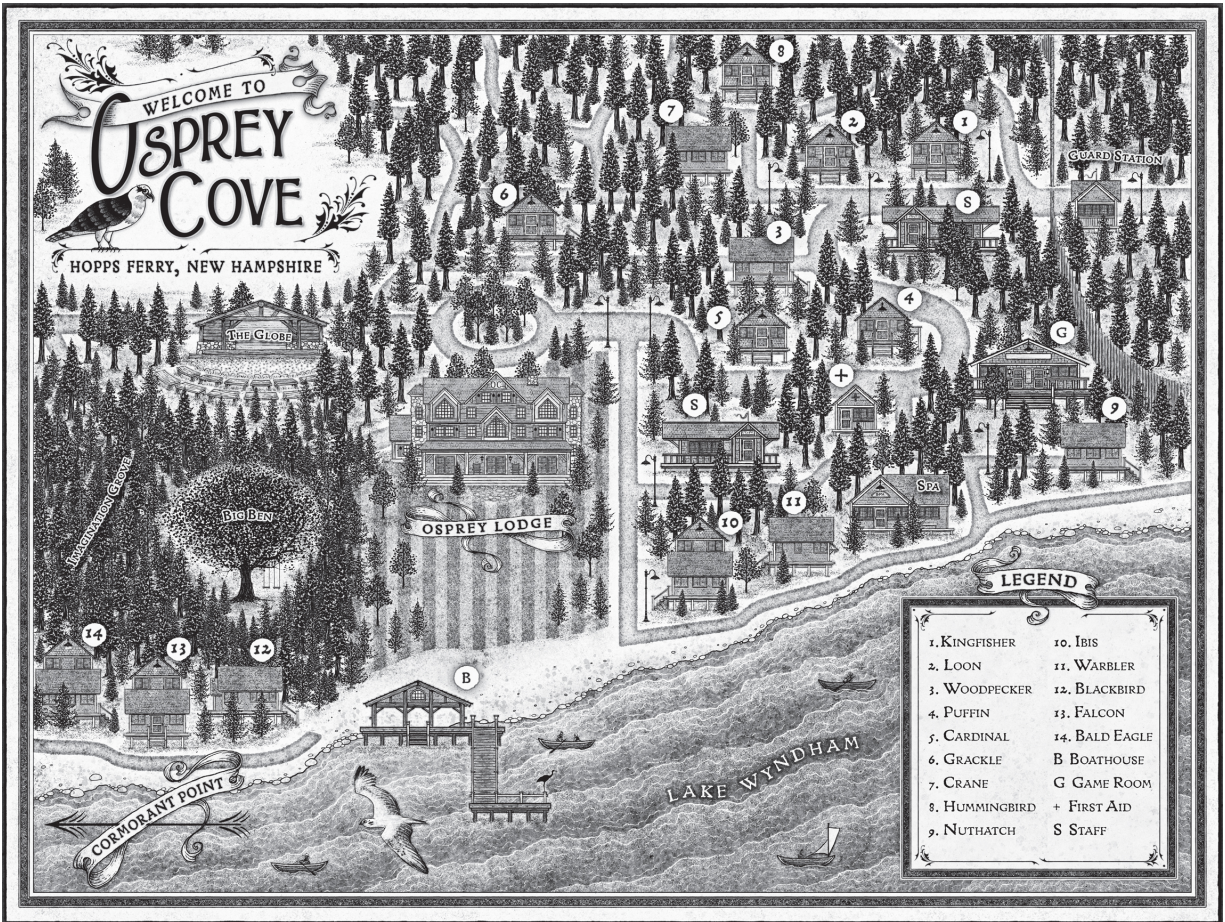
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*For great teachers everywhere—especially Ed Logue, John Balaban,  
Charlotte Holmes, Robert C. S. Downs, Shelby Hearon, T. R. Smith, and  
Charles Cantalupo*



WELCOME TO  
**OSPREY COVE**  
 HOPPS FERRY, NEW HAMPSHIRE

**LEGEND**

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

I.

THE INVITATION



## 1.

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

“Dad?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Maggie? Is this better?”

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

“Dad, can you hear me?”

“Are you okay?”



“Dad? Hello? Can you hear me?”

I mashed the phone to my ear and shouted yes, YES, I could hear her.

“Where are you? Do you need help?”

And the line went dead.

CALL FAILED.

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

## 2.

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

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

My phone buzzed again.

The same UNKNOWN CALLER.

"Dad? Is this better?"

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

"Maggie, are you okay?"

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

"Where are you?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yeah, I just had my three-year anniversary."

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

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

She cut me off midsentence: "Dad, I've got some news. I'm getting married."

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

*She was getting married?*

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

### 3.

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

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

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

So now listen to what happened:

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

“I’ll be there,” I said, and my voice cracked because I was starting to cry. “Of course I’ll be there.”

“Okay, good. Because we’re mailing the invites tomorrow and—I wanted to call first.”

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

“Dad? Are you still there?”

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

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

I had trouble focusing on her story because I was too busy doing the math. “You met *last* Halloween? Six months ago?”

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

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

“What’s Aidan do for a living?”

“He’s a painter.”

“In the union?”

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

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

“He makes art for a living?”

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

“What does he get for that?”

“I’m sorry?”

“How much does he make?”

“I’m not going to tell you.”

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

“First marriage?”

“Yes.”

“Any kids?”

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

“What about his mother?”

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

“And his dad?”

“Fantastic. Amazing.”

“What’s he do?”

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

“How is it complicated?”

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

What the hell was that supposed to mean?

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

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

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

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

Clearly she just wanted to get off the phone, but I couldn’t resist making one more push: “Is Aidan’s father in jail?”

“No, it’s nothing bad.”

“Is he famous? Is he an actor?”

“He’s not an actor.”

“But he’s famous?”

“I told you: I don’t want to get into it.”

“Just give me his name, Maggie. I’ll google him.”

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

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

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

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

And then I was interrupted by a soft click.

She’d already hung up.