

On what had begun as just another June day in Manhattan, Susanne Seebring Malloy returned to her Upper East Side brownstone after lunch with friends to find a saffron yellow envelope in the mail. She knew it was from her mother, even without the vineyard logo in the upper left corner or her mother's elegant script in the address. Between the Asquonset, Rhode Island, postmark and the scent of Natalie's trademark freesia, there was no doubt at all.

Susanne stepped out of her Ferragamos and curled her toes in dismay. A letter from her mother was the last thing she needed. She would look at it later. She was feeling hollow enough as it was.

And whose fault was that? she asked herself, irrationally annoyed. It was *Natalie's* fault. Natalie had lived her life by the book, doing everything just so. She had been the most dutiful wife Susanne had ever seen — and she had been Susanne's role model. So Susanne had become a dutiful wife herself. By the time the women's movement had taken hold, she was so busy catering to Mark and the kids that she didn't have time for a career. Now the children were grown and resented her intrusion, and Mark had staff to do the small things she used to do. She still traveled with him sometimes, but though he claimed to love having her along, he didn't truly need her there. She was window dressing. Nothing more.

She had time for a career now. She had the energy. But she was fifty-six, for goodness sake. Fifty-six was a little old to be starting a career.

So where did that leave her? she wondered, discouraged now as she took the new catalogues from the mail and settled into a chair by the window overlooking the courtyard. It left her with Neiman Marcus, Blooming-dale's, Hammacher Schlemmer, and a sense that somehow, somewhere, she had missed the boat.

She should ask her mother about *that*, she thought dryly — as if Natalie would sympathize with boredom or understand restlessness. And even if she did, Natalie didn't discuss problems. She discussed clothing. She discussed wallpaper. She discussed bread-and-butter letters on engraved stationery. She was an expert on manners.

So was Susanne. But she was fed up with those things. They were dull. They were petty. They were as irrelevant as the bouillabaisse she had cooked yesterday before remembering that Mark had a dinner meeting, or the cache of hors d'oeuvres and pastries she had prepared in the past six months and frozen for the guests who never came anymore — and speaking of food, if Natalie was sending her the menu for the vineyard's Fall Harvest Feast, Susanne would scream.

Ripe for a fight, she pushed herself out of the chair and retrieved the yellow envelope from the hall table. Mail from her mother was common. Natalie was forever sending copies of reviews of one Asquonset wine or another, and if not a review, then a personal letter of praise from a vintner in California or France — though Susanne wasn't interested in any of it. The vineyard was her parents' pride and joy, not hers. She had spent decades trying to convince them of that. Lobbying efforts to get her involved, like most else in her life, had grown old.

But this envelope was different. It was of the same heavy stock that Natalie favored, but its color — deep yellow with dark blue ink — was a far cry from the classic ivory with burgundy ink of usual Asquonset mailings. And it wasn't addressed to Susanne alone. It was addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Mark Malloy in a calligrapher's script that, too, was a deviation from Asquonset style.

Uneasy, Susanne held the envelope for a moment, thinking that something had been going on with Natalie the last few times they talked. Her words had been optimistic ones, focusing on how Asquonset was recovering from Alexander's death, but she had seemed...troubled. More than once, Susanne sensed there was something Natalie wasn't saying, and since Susanne didn't want to be involved in vineyard business, she didn't prod. She simply decided that being troubled was part of the mourning process. Suddenly, now, she wondered if there was a connection between this envelope and that tension.

Opening the flap, she pulled a matching yellow card from inside.

PLEASE JOIN US  
FOR A CELEBRATION OF OUR WEDDING  
LABOR DAY SUNDAY AT 4 P.M.  
THE GREAT HOUSE  
ASQUONSET VINEYARD AND WINERY  
NATALIE SEEBRING AND CARL BURKE

Susanne frowned. She read the words again.

*Wedding?*

Stunned, she read the invitation a third time, but the words didn't change. Natalie remarrying? It didn't make sense. Natalie marrying *Carl*? That made even less sense. Carl Burke had been the vineyard manager for thirty-five years. He was an employee, an earthy man of meager means, nowhere *near* on a par with Alexander Seebring — Susanne's father — Natalie's husband of fifty-eight years, dead barely six months.

Oh yes. Susanne knew that Carl had been a big help to Natalie in the last few months. Natalie mentioned him often — more often of late. But *talking* about the man was one thing; marrying him was something else entirely.

Was this a joke? Not likely. Even if Natalie were a comic, which she wasn't, she wouldn't do anything as tasteless as this.

Susanne turned the card over, looking for a word of explanation from her mother, but there was none.

Reading the words a fourth time, having no choice but to take them as real, she was deeply hurt. Mothers didn't *do* things like this, she told herself. They didn't break momentous news to their daughters in a formal invitation — not unless they were estranged, and Natalie and Susanne weren't. They talked on the phone once a week. They saw each other every month or so. Granted, they didn't confide in each other. That wasn't the nature of their relationship. But even in spite of that, it didn't make sense to Susanne that Natalie wouldn't have forewarned her about Carl — unless Natalie had forewarned her, in her own evasive way, through those frequent mentions of Carl.

Perhaps Susanne had missed that, but she certainly hadn't missed mention of a wedding. There hadn't been one. For all outward purposes, Natalie was still in mourning.

Susanne read the invitation a final time. Still stunned, still disbelieving, she picked up the phone.

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In the foyer of a small brick Colonial in Washington, D.C.'s, Woodley Park, a yellow envelope identical to the one his sister had received lay in the heap on the floor under the mail slot when Greg Seebring arrived home that same afternoon. He didn't see it at first. All he saw was the heap itself, which was far too big to represent a single day's mail. He had been gone for three. He guessed he was looking at mail from all three, but where was his wife?

'*Jill?*' he called. Loosening his tie, he went looking. She wasn't in the living room, kitchen, or den. He went up the stairs, but the two bedrooms there were empty, too. Confused, he stood at the top of the banister and tried to recall whether she had anything planned. If so, she hadn't told him. Not that they'd talked during his trip. He'd been on the go the whole time, leaving the hotel early and returning late, too talked out to pick up the phone. He had felt really good about catching an early plane home. He had thought she would be pleased.

Pleased, indeed. She wasn't even *here*.

He should have called.

But hell, she hadn't called him, either.

Feeling suddenly exhausted, he went down the stairs for his bag. As soon as he lifted it, though, he set it back down and, taking only his laptop, scooped up the mail. Again, it seemed like too much.

He wondered if Jill had gone to see her mother. She had been considering that for a while.

Dumping the lot on the kitchen counter, he hooked the laptop to the phone and booted it up. While he waited, he pushed junk mail one way and bills another. Most of what remained was identifiable by a return address. There was an envelope from the Committee to Elect Michael Bonner, a friend of his who was running for the U.S. Senate and surely wanted money. There was one from a college friend of Jill's, and another postmarked Akron, Ohio, where Jill's mother

lived, perhaps mailed before Jill had decided to visit. There was one with a more familiar postmark and an even more familiar scent.

Lifting the yellow envelope, he pictured his mother. Strong. Gracious. Daffodil-bright, if aloof.

But the vineyard colors were ivory with burgundy. She always used them. Asquonset was her identity.

The envelope had the weight of an invitation. No surprise there; partying was Natalie's specialty. But then, Alexander Seebring had loved a big bash, and who could begrudge him? No gentleman farmer, this man. Many a day he had walked the vineyard in his jeans and denim shirt alongside his manager. If not that, he was traveling to spread the Asquonset name, and the hard work had paid off. After years of struggle, he had Asquonset turning a tidy profit. He had earned the right to party.

Natalie knew how to oblige. She was in her element directing caterers, florists, and musicians. There had always been two festivals at Asquonset each year — one to welcome spring, one to celebrate the harvest. The spring party had been skipped this year, coming as it would have so soon after Al's death. Apparently, though, Natalie was chafing at the bit. She hated wearing black — didn't have a single black dress in her wardrobe, had actually had to go out and buy one for the funeral.

So, barely six months later, she was returning to form. Greg wasn't sure he approved. It seemed wrong, what with her husband of so many years — his father — still fresh in his grave, and the future of Asquonset up in the air.

Natalie wanted Greg to run it. She hadn't said that in as many words, but he had given her his answer anyway: *No. No way. Out of the question.*

He wondered if she had found a buyer — wondered, suddenly, whether this party was to introduce whoever it was. But she would have told him first. Then again, maybe not. He had made his feelings about the vineyard more than clear. He was a pollster. He was on the road working with clients three weeks out of four. He had his own business to run, and he did it well. Making wine had been his father's passion. It wasn't Greg's.

Not that he was exactly an impartial observer. If Natalie sold Asquonset, there would be money coming in, half of which eventually would be his. In that sense, it behooved him to check out a potential buyer. He didn't want his mother letting the vineyard go for anything less than it was worth.

Dropping the envelope on the counter, he pulled up the laptop and typed in his password.

But that envelope seemed to command his attention. Curious to know what Natalie had in mind, he picked it up again, slit it open, and pulled out a card.

PLEASE JOIN US

FOR A CELEBRATION OF OUR WEDDING

LABOR DAY SUNDAY AT 4 P.M.

THE GREAT HOUSE

ASQUONSET VINEYARD AND WINERY

NATALIE SEEBRING AND CARL BURKE

He stared blankly at the card.

A wedding? His mother and Carl?

His mother and *Carl*? Where had *that* come from?

Natalie was seventy-six. Maybe she was losing it, he thought, shaking his head. And what about Carl? He had to be a few years older than that. What was in *his* mind?

Carl had been at the vineyard forever. Alexander had considered him a friend. But a friend wouldn't snatch up a man's widow less than six months after his death, any more than a man's widow would turn right around and marry the nearest thing in pants.

Understandably, Natalie would be leaning on Carl more, now that Alexander was gone. Greg hadn't thought anything of the fact that lately she was mentioning Carl more often. In hindsight, he realized that those mentions were always in praise. It looked like Greg had missed the point.

Was it romance? *Sex*? Weren't they a little old? Greg was forty, and losing interest fast. Sex required effort, if you wanted to do it right. So maybe they didn't do it the way *he* did. Hell, he was embarrassed thinking of his mother doing it at all. But...with Carl? Carl was an old *coot*!

Maybe he was a clever one, though. Maybe he had his eye on the vineyard. Hadn't he retired and passed the reins on to his own son? That supposedly had been Alexander's doing, but Carl had been vineyard manager too long not to have a say in who took over. So maybe Carl wanted Simon to have the vineyard. Maybe marrying Natalie was his way of ensuring it.

Greg had to call Natalie, but Lord, he hated doing that. What could he say — *I don't want the vineyard, but I don't want Simon having it either?*

Maybe he should call Susanne first. She saw Natalie more often than he did. She might know what was going on.

Lord, he hated doing that, too. Susanne was sixteen years his senior. They shared a mother, but they had never been close.

Swearing under his breath, he loosened his collar button. He didn't need this. He needed a vacation, actually had one planned. So going to Asquonset on Labor Day weekend was out of the question. He was going north, all the way to Ontario for a fishing trip. Already had it booked.

Not that Jill was pleased. Given a choice, she'd take Asquonset. She liked it there. At least, he thought she did. Hard to say lately. She was going through something. She had been quieter than usual. Could she be having a midlife crisis? he wondered. At *thirty-eight*?

He didn't want to think about his wife falling apart, but it beat thinking about Natalie marrying Carl. He would deal with them later. Crossing the kitchen, he opened the door to the garage. Jill's car was gone, which meant it was probably parked at the airport. Definitely visiting her mother, he decided. Then he had a thought. Hoping for a glimpse of what was bugging her — thinking that the letter from her mother might hold a clue — knowing that he could always say he had accidentally slit it open along with the rest of the mail — he opened it and pulled out a neatly folded sheet.

*'Dear Greg...'*

*Dear Greg.* It was not from his mother-in-law to Jill. It was to him. He looked quickly at the address. Not to Jill at all. To *him*. *From* Jill.

Feeling a sudden foreboding, he began reading.

In a garage studio behind an old white Victorian on a narrow side street in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Olivia Jones was daydreaming at work. She did it often. It was one of the perks of her job.

She restored old photographs, a skill that required patience, a sharp eye, and a steady hand. She had all three, along with an imagination that could take her inside the world of almost any picture. Even now, as she dotted varying shades of gray ink to restore a faded face, she was inside the frame with a family of migrant workers living in California in the early thirties. The Depression had taken hold. Life was hard, food scarce. Children worked with their parents and grandparents, hour after hour, in whatever fields needed picking. They began the day dirty and ended it more so. Their faces were somber, their cheeks gaunt, their eyes large and haunting.

They sat close together on the porch of a weathered shack. Moving around them, Olivia went inside. The place was small but functional. Bedding lay against nearly every wall, with a woodstove and a few chairs in the center. The air held the smell of dust and hard work, but there was more. On a heavy table nearby sat a loaf of fresh-baked bread, aromatic and warm. A stew cooked on the woodstove. One shelf held an assortment of cracked pottery and tin cups and plates. There would be clinking when the family ate. She could hear it now.

Returning to the porch, she was drawn in with an open arm, reconnected to this group as they were connected to one another. Everyone touched — a hand, an arm, a shoulder, a cheek. They were nine people spanning three generations, surviving the bleakness of their lives by taking comfort in family. They had nothing by way of material goods, only one another.

Olivia was thirty-five. She had a ten-year-old daughter, a job, an apartment with a TV and VCR, a computer, and a washer and dryer. She had a car. She had a Patagonia vest, L.L.Bean clogs, and a Nikon that was old enough and sturdy enough to fetch a pretty penny.

But boy, did she envy that migrant family its closeness.

'Those were hard times,' came a gruff voice by her shoulder.

She looked up to see her boss, Otis Thurman, scowling at the photograph. It was one of several that had been newly uncovered, believed to be the work of Dorothea Lange. The Metropolitan Museum in New York had commissioned him to restore them. Olivia was doing the work.

'They were *simpler* times,' she said.

He grunted. 'You want 'em? Take 'em. I'm leaving. Lock up when you go.' He walked off with less shuffle than another man of seventy-five might have, but then, Otis had his moods to keep him sharp. He had been in something of a snit all day, but after five years in his employ, Olivia knew not to take it personally. Otis was a frustrated Picasso, a would-be painter who would never be as good at creation as he was at restoration. But hope died hard, even at his age. He was returning to his canvas and oil full-time — seven weeks away from retirement and counting.

He was looking forward to it. Olivia was not.

He kept announcing the hours. Olivia tried not to hear.

*We're a good team*, she argued. *I'm too old*, he replied.

And *that* was what intrigued her about this migrant family. The old man in the photograph was grizzled enough to make Otis look young, but he was still there, still productive, still part of that larger group.

Things were different nowadays. People burned out, and no wonder. They were up on the high wire of life alone with no net.

Olivia worried about Otis retiring, pictured him sitting alone day after day, with art tools that he couldn't use to his own high standards and no one to bully. He wasn't going to be happy.

*Wrong, Olivia*. He had friends all over the art community and plenty of money saved up. He would be delighted. *She* was the one in trouble.

She had finally found her niche. Restoring old photographs was a natural for someone with a knowledge of cameras and an eye for art — and she had both, though it had taken her awhile to see it. Trial and error was the story of her life. She had waitressed. She had done telemarketing. She had sold clothes. Selling cameras had come after that, along with the discovery that she loved taking pictures. Then had come Tess. Then brief stints apprenticing with a professional photographer and freelancing for a museum that wanted pictures of its shows. Then Otis.

For the first time in her life, Olivia truly loved her work. She was better at photo restoration than she had been at anything else, and could lose herself for hours in prints from the past, smelling the age, feeling the grandeur. For Olivia, the world of yesterday was more romantic than today. She would have liked to have lived back then.

Given that she couldn't, she liked working for Otis, and the feeling was mutual. Few people in her life had put up with her for five years. Granted, she indulged him his moods, and even he acknowledged that she did the job better than the long line of assistants before her.

Still, he genuinely liked her. The eight-by-ten tacked to the wall proved it. He had taken it last week when she had shown up at work with her hair cut painfully short. She had chopped it off herself in a fit of disgust, irritated with long hair in the sweltering heat. Immediately she had regretted it. A barber had neatened things up a bit, but she had gone on to work wearing a big straw hat — which Otis had promptly removed.

Bless his soul, he said that he liked her hair short, said that it made her look lighthearted and fun — and then he proceeded to catch just that on film. She was standing in front of a plain concrete wall, wearing a long tank dress, toes peeking from sandals, hair boyish. Feeling exposed and awkward, as unused to being on that side of the camera as she was embarrassed about her hair, she had wrapped her arms around her middle and tucked in her chin.

Otis had used light, angle, and focus to make her look willowy rather than thin, spirited rather than self-conscious. He had made the shiny strands of that short, sandy hair look stylish, and the maroon polish on her toenails look exotic. He had made her brown eyes large in a delicate face. Somehow, he had made her look pretty.

When her eyes slid from that photograph to another tacked nearby, her smile widened. Tess was with her in that one, nine years old the summer before. They were dressed as a pair of dance hall girls in a Dodge City saloon in the days of the wild, wild West. Otis had condemned the picture as the lowest form of commercial photography, but they'd had a ball dressing up. They talked about going for an Elizabethan look this summer — assuming they could afford another weekend at the shore. Money was tighter now, without child support. The reality of that was just sinking in.

Jared Stark had let her down in every imaginable way. He was supposed to have loved her. Barring that, he was supposed to have loved their child. At the very least, he was supposed to have helped keep that child sheltered and clothed. So, what had he done? He had died.

A timer rang. Setting aside the anger that had displaced grief, Olivia silenced it. Tess was the love of her life, and school was nearly out for the day. Recapping her inks, she washed her brushes and carefully placed the maybe-Lange photographs in the vault. She neatened the office, filled her briefcase with paperwork to do at home, and opened the door in time to greet the mailman.

Otis's personal letters and bills went in one pile, those addressed to the studio went in another. Among the larger pieces there was a supermarket flyer, a mailing from the American Institute for



Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, and the week's *Time*. At the bottom of the pile was a large manila pack.

One look at its sender and Olivia felt a wave of pleasure. The mailing label was ivory with a burgundy logo that depicted, in a single minimalist line, a bunch of grapes spilling from a wineglass. Beneath it was the stylized script — so familiar now — that read *Asquonset Vineyard and Winery, Asquonset, Rhode Island*. The address was handwritten in the more traditional but no less familiar style of Natalie Seebring.

Holding the large envelope to her nose, Olivia closed her eyes and inhaled. She knew that freesia scent now as well as she knew the handwriting. It was elegant, conjuring images of prosperity and warmth. She basked in it for a minute, then crossed to the large table where the last batch of Seebring photographs lay. They were from the early fifties and had needed varying degrees of repair, but they were ready for return. Now there was a new pack. Natalie's timing was perfect.

Olivia had never met the woman, but she felt she knew her well. Photographs told stories, and what they didn't tell, Olivia easily made up. Natalie had been a beautiful child in the twenties, a striking teenager in the thirties. In the forties she had been the blushing bride of a dashing soldier, and in the fifties, the smiling mother of two adoring children. According to her photographs, she dressed well and lived in style. Whether a parlor with an exquisite Oriental rug in the foreground, an elegantly upholstered settee at midrange, and original art on the wall behind, or a garden surrounded by lush shrubbery that screamed of color even in black-and-white, the backgrounds of the pictures she sent were entirely consistent with the image of a successful wine-making family.

No downtrodden migrant crew this one. Of course, these pictures didn't have the artistic import of one taken by Dorothea Lange, but Olivia had followed the growth of this family for months and was totally involved. The appeal here was prosperity and ease. She had fantasized about being a Seebring more times than she could count.

Her own story was light-years different from anything she had seen in the Seebring pictures. She had never met her father. Her mother didn't even know who he was. Olivia had been the product of a one-night stand on a liquor-blurred New Year's Eve in an alley off Manhattan's Times Square. Carol Jones, her mother, had been seventeen at the time.

Feminists might have called it rape, but months later, when Carol finally realized she was pregnant, she was rebellious enough and defiant enough to tell her parents it was love. For those pious folk, the pregnancy was one defiant act too many. They disowned her. She retaliated, predictably rebellious and defiant, by leaving home with nothing of her heritage but her name — Jones.

A lot of good that did Olivia. There were pages of Jones listings in every telephone directory. There were pages and pages of them in New York. And now, not only couldn't she find her grandparents, she couldn't find her mother either. Moving from place to place herself, Olivia had left a trail of bread crumbs to rival Hansel and Gretel, but no relative ever came looking.

Apparently, no relative cared — and it was their loss. Olivia might be no prize, but Tess was. Tess was a gem.

Unfortunately, the loss went two ways. This gap in her history meant that Olivia and Tess went without extended family. It was just the two of them — just the two of them against the world. That wasn't so bad, though; Olivia had come to terms with it. She could cope.

It didn't mean she couldn't dream, of course, and lately she dreamed she was related to Natalie Seebring. Being grandmother and granddaughter was pushing it a little, but there was a woman in some of the early Asquonset pictures who, given a marginal resemblance to Carol, could be Olivia's grandmother. Olivia hadn't seen the woman in any of Asquonset's postwar pictures, but there were easy explanations for that. She might have been a WAC who had fallen for a serviceman and ended up in New York. Her husband might have been a rigid military type who wanted things done his way, or he might have been irrationally jealous, forbidding her contact with her family. Hence, her absence in photographs.

But if she was Natalie's sister, then Natalie would be Olivia's great-aunt. Even if she were only a cousin, the blood bond would be there.

Olivia glanced at the clock. She had to go get Tess. Time was growing short.

But the lure of this new package was too great to resist. Opening the clasp, she peeked inside. The scent of freesia was stronger now. She pushed aside a cover letter and saw several dozen photographs. Most were eight-by-tens in black-and-white. Under them was a bright yellow envelope.

Curious, she pulled it out. Otis's name and address were on the front, written not in Natalie's freehand but in a calligrapher's script. She was giving a party, Olivia decided — and immediately vowed to go as Otis's date. She didn't care if people snickered behind their hands. She wanted to see Asquonset. She wanted to meet Natalie.

She laid the invitation on Otis's desk with his personal mail — then quickly took it back and returned it to the mailer with the pictures. He wouldn't be in again until tomorrow. She liked the idea of having the invitation in her own house for a night.

Tucking the package into her briefcase, she checked the office a final time, then let herself out and locked the door. Natalie's new batch of pictures would be the treat she gave herself that night when everything else was done.

Savoring the anticipation, she half walked, half ran through narrow streets hemmed in by tightly packed houses, trees, and parked cars. The June air was stagnant and warm. She arrived at Tess's school in a sweat, a full ten minutes late.

Most of the children had gone. A few stragglers remained on the playground, but they were immersed in themselves. Tess stood alone at a corner of the school yard with a shoulder

weighted down by her backpack, one foot turned in, her glasses halfway down her nose, and a desolate look on her face.

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