

Prologue

Given their druthers, Amanda and Graham would have eloped. At thirty and thirty-six, respectively, all they wanted was to be married. But Amanda's father insisted that his only child have a big wedding, her mother delighted in spending his money, and Graham's family loved a party.

So they had a lavish June wedding at the Cape Cod country club to which Amanda's father belonged. The ceremony was held overlooking a salt marsh, with willets, terns, and three hundred guests bearing witness. Then, led by the bride and groom, who walked arm in arm, those three hundred guests trooped across the eighteenth green and around the clubhouse for a buffet dinner in the garden. The place was lush with greenery, vivid with lilacs and peonies, scented with roses, all of which was appreciated far more by the bride's guests, who were into form, than the groom's, who were into fun. Likewise, the toasts ran along party lines, starting with that of the best man.

Will O'Leary was the next older brother to Graham, who was the youngest of eight siblings. Champagne glass in hand, he directed an O'Leary grin at his wife and four children before turning to the groom.

'No matter that I'm the older of us by a year, you've been a tough act to follow, Graham O'Leary. You always did better in school. You always did better in sports. You were always the one elected class president, and boy, there were times when I hated that.' There were chuckles. 'Not now, though, because I know something you don't.' His grin turned mischievous. 'You may have gotten the family's looks and brains, but that doesn't mean much in the dark of night. So. I wish for you and Amanda everything I've had these past fifteen years.' He raised his glass. 'To you both. May your lives be filled with sweet secrets, hearty laughter, and *great* sex.'

There were hoots and cheers, the clinking of glasses, the downing of drink.

When the noise subsided, Beth Fisher stepped to the microphone. One of three bridesmaids dressed in elegant navy, she spoke softly. 'Amanda was single a long time, waiting for just the right guy to come along. We used to commiserate about that, she and I. Then I met my guy, and Amanda got busy with work and put her own search on hold. She wasn't looking when she first saw Graham, but that's how some of the best things in life happen.' She lifted her glass. 'To Amanda and Graham. May you love each other forever.'

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Amanda hadn't put her search on hold, so much as despaired that she would find a man she could trust enough to love. Then, one unsuspecting August afternoon, she sought refuge from the heat of Manhattan by visiting her former thesis advisor in Greenwich, and there Graham was, stripped to the waist and sweating beautifully as he planted junipers on a hillside by the woman's home.

There were six men at work. Amanda had no idea why her eye was drawn to Graham rather than to one of the others.

No. That wasn't true. She knew very well why her eye was drawn to him. He was riveting with his dark hair and close beard, taller than the others and more finely muscled, though she later learned that he didn't often do the digging. He was the brains of the operation. She claimed to have been drawn by that, too.

And how had she known anything about brains from the distance of a hundred feet? His eyes. They had found hers over the slant of that dug-up hillside, and had held her gaze in a way that suggested either total brashness or supreme confidence. Both were foreign to her experience with men, and one as titillating as the other. Then, barely fifteen minutes into her visit, he knocked on the door with a drawing of the landscape plans for another part of the yard.

The interruption was deliberate. He admitted that right from the start. He had wanted an introduction, and he got it.

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The groom's oldest sister, MaryAnne O'Leary Walker, came to the mike wearing a green suit that had fit her better before the last three of her five children were born. Undaunted and confident, she turned to Graham, who stood surrounded by friends, an arm around his blond-haired, white-laced-and-beaded bride.

'I was twelve when you were born,' MaryAnne blurted out, 'and changed more of your diapers than either of us cares to admit, so it's your turn now.' She raised her glass. 'May you have *lots* of babies, and lots of *patience*!'

'Hear, hear!' chorused the crowd, echoing itself in diminishing degrees until another bridesmaid in navy stepped up to the mike.

'Amanda and I met in graduate school,' said Gail Wald, her tone genteel. 'We were psychologists in neighboring schools in New York before Graham stole her away, and I'm not sure I'll ever forgive him for it. But the fact is that Graham has been a smile in Amanda's eyes since the day she met him. In a world where smiles often come hard, that means a lot. When you do what we do for a living, you understand this. You know how precious smiles can be. You also know how to spot a real one, and that's the kind my friend wears.' Holding her glass high, she faced the beaming couple. 'To Amanda and Graham. You may have happened fast, but you're the real thing. Here's to thousands and thousands more smiles, and a life filled with health and prosperity.'

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Amanda didn't usually like things happening fast. She far preferred to explore, ponder, and plan. When she dated, she wanted to know almost everything about a man well ahead of a first kiss, because she was seriously jaded. She had seen the downside of mismatched couples in her own

home, long before she began hearing tales complaining about parents from the students she counseled, and she certainly didn't believe in love at first sight. Lust, perhaps, but not love. The therapist in her wanted reason and rhyme.

Her attraction to Graham O'Leary made a mockery of that. He turned her into a sushi lover on their first date the day following their meeting in Greenwich, and when they went dancing the night after that, she was lost. Graham was an incredible dancer. He led with fluidity and grace, and she — independent soul though she was — followed his lead. One song became the next, and then the next. When he tucked her hand close to his heart, she felt the rest of her being drawn closer as well.

For Graham, that was a defining moment. He didn't need a woman who fit the image of his mother or his brothers. He'd already been there. This time, he needed a woman who fit him. Something about the way Amanda settled into his body said she did — and it went beyond the physical, just as he needed it to. He was thirty-five. He knew what physical attraction was about, but there was more to Amanda than just physical appeal. She was a pedigreed lady, classy and reserved, but she seemed to feel the spark between them as strongly as he did. The surprise he saw in her eyes when he drew her close, seconds before she sank into his body, said that though she didn't trust easily, she trusted him.

He would remember that moment until the day he died. He had felt strong. He had felt unique. He had felt needed.

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Dorothy O'Leary, mother of the groom, didn't raise her glass in toast. Her smile was wooden, her eyes glazed. She stood off to the side with her brother and his family, seeming distant from the party until her third oldest son approached the mike. Only then did her eyes clear and her features soften.

Peter O'Leary was a Jesuit priest. Possessed with a remarkable charisma that was only enhanced by the Roman collar he wore, he easily quieted the crowd. To the bride and groom, he said, 'I might've worried when you chose a country club wedding over a church one, had I not spent so much time with the two of you these last couple months. If ever a relationship seemed right, this is it.' Leaving the mike, he approached the newlyweds. With a hand on Graham's shoulder, he lifted his glass. 'Love shines from your faces. May it always be so. May you live long, may you give more than you take, may you serve our Lord in wondrous ways.' He paused, let a twinkle enter his eye, and succumbed to the O'Leary in him. 'And, yes, may you reproduce well!'

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Amanda didn't sleep around. She'd had two lovers before Graham, had dated each for several months and given due thought to time, place, and precautions before shedding her clothes.

With Graham, everything was different. He had suggested they go hiking, which sounded wonderfully adventurous to Amanda, who envisioned a day trip, only to have Graham show up with sleeping bags, food and drink, and the key to a friend's cabin, four miles up in the woods.

It never occurred to her to say no. She wasn't a hiker, hadn't owned a sleeping bag in her life — at least, not the kind that could insulate a body in the chill of a mountain night, which was the kind Graham had brought. But he was capable and coordinated. He liked explaining things to her and did it well. He had no qualms about asking questions when they got to talking about things she knew more about than he, and then there was his smile. It was relaxed, wholehearted, and wide enough to cut a crease through his beard on either side. All told, being with him was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to her.

The mountain they hiked was lushly green, with clear streams, sweet birdsongs, and breathtaking vistas making it a heady climb from the trailhead on up. He knew where they were going, leading as skillfully as he had on the dance floor, and she put herself in his hands as she had done then.

They didn't make it to the cabin. They had barely finished lunch when he stretched her out in a sheltered glen just off the path and made love to her, right there, in broad daylight. They were sweaty and dusty and — she thought — tired, but once started, they couldn't stop. She remembered thinking that if he hadn't taken the responsibility for birth control, she would have done without. She needed him too badly for caution, felt too whole when he was inside her to care.

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'My family is incorrigible,' declared Kathryn O'Leary Wood from the mike. Her eyes touched briefly on Megan Donovan, Graham's childhood sweetheart, first wife, and still a dear family friend, before settling on Graham and Amanda. 'This message is from me and Megan. Amanda, my brother is the best. In addition to being positively gorgeous, he is smart and sensitive and special. It looks to me like you're all of those things, too.' She paused and smiled. 'So we can expect gorgeous *babies* that are smart, sensitive, and special. I wish you and Gray all the happiness in the world.' Her eyes narrowed on the groom, her junior by three years. 'As for you, Graham O'Leary, this is the very last time I'm doing this for you!'

The applause was long and loud, ebbing only when Amanda's maid of honor came to the mike. Tall, slim, and shy as she looked over a sea of faces with their wide O'Leary smiles, she said a soft, 'I don't have children, or brothers and sisters like you. But I do have a history with the bride. I know her parents, and would like to thank them now for such a beautiful party.' She lifted her glass to Deborah Carr on one side of the room and William Carr on the other, and waited for the applause to end before speaking again. 'I'm Amanda's oldest friend here. We met in kindergarten and have stayed close all this time. Amanda has been there for me over the years in ways only she and I know. She is the best listener, the clearest thinker, the most loyal confidante. It's no surprise to me that she's so good with teenagers. I've often envied those kids. Now I envy Graham.'

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Graham would have envied himself, if that had been possible. He knew what it was like to stand at an altar and look down a flower-strewn aisle toward the back of the crowd at the moment when his bride appeared. What he didn't know was what it was like to have everything else...totally...fade away. He wasn't prepared for that, or for the little catch deep in his chest that actually brought tears to his eyes.

He was that taken with her, felt that privileged to have her. She was smart and cultured and fine — everything he had always admired but never felt that he was, coming from the family he did. For all their differences, though, he and Amanda had yet to have an argument. They liked the same furniture, the same food, the same music. They wanted the same house, the same big family. From his first sight of her back on that Greenwich hillside, he'd had the absurdly sentimental belief that the single, best reason for the demise of his marriage to Megan was that Amanda was waiting for him.

This day, all else had indeed faded. He had seen only her, walking toward him down that grassy path, and when his heart shifted in a way that he knew would be permanent, he let it be.

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Concluding her toast, Amanda's maid of honor caught Graham's eye. 'My friend is precious. Take good care of her, please.' She raised her glass. 'Here's to you both. Let the wait have been worth every minute.'

There were sighs and soft words of assent, then a deep-voiced, 'Speaking of the wait...' and the inevitable approach of Malcolm O'Leary to the mike. The oldest O'Leary sibling — proprietor, along with the second oldest, James, of their late father's hardware store and father of five himself — raised his glass. 'I have one piece of advice for my handsome brother and his beautiful bride. Go to it, Amanda and Gray. You're starting late.'

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Amanda and Graham celebrated their first wedding anniversary by looking at a house. They had seen others before it, but none as large or as handsome, none in as upscale a community, and none that excited them as this one did. The asking price was definitely a reach. But Graham's work as a landscape architect had grown enough for him to hire a full-time assistant, and Amanda had just been appointed school psychologist in the same town as the house.

That town was Woodley. Prosperous and pristine, it lay in a cluster of rolling hills in western Connecticut, ninety-some minutes by car from New York, and counted among its fourteen thousand residents half a dozen CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, innumerable lawyers and doctors, and a growing list of the Internet-riche. The population was increasingly young. As new, large homes sprang up on wooded lots, or older residents retired and moved south, the town's streets were seeing a growing parade of Expeditions.

The house itself, barely ten years old, was the first in a circle of four Victorians that had been built around a wooded cul-de-sac. With its generous yellow body and white trim, wide

wraparound porch, quaint picket fence and gaslights, it was as picturesque as its neighbors — and the beauty didn't end at the front door. The entry hall was open and bright, flanked on either side by living and dining rooms with carved moldings, mahogany built-ins, and high windows. At the back of the house was a large kitchen with granite counters, wood floors, and a glassed-in breakfast area. A winding staircase, replete with window seats at each of two landings, led to four bedrooms on the second floor, one of which was a lavish master suite. As if all that weren't enough, the real estate agent led them to a pair of rooms over the garage.

'Offices,' Amanda whispered excitedly when the woman turned away to take a cell call.

Graham whispered back, 'Could you counsel people here?'

'In a minute. Could you draw landscape plans here?'

'Big time.' The whispering went on. 'Look at the woods. Smell the lilacs. If not here, where? Did you see the bedrooms?'

'They're *huge*.'

'Except for the one right next to ours. It could be a nursery.'

'No, no.' Amanda envisioned something else. 'I'd put the cradle in our room and make the little room into a den. It'd be perfect for reading goodnight stories.'

'Then we'll give Zoe and Emma the room across the hall, and put Tyler and Hal at the end.'

'Not Hal,' Amanda begged. It was a long-standing debate. 'Graham, Jr. And if they're anything like you and your brothers, they'll be into mischief, so they should be closer.'

'Hal,' Graham insisted, 'and I want them farther off. Boys make more noise. Trust me on this.' Slipping an arm around her waist, he drew her lower body close. His eyes grew heavier, the color on his cheekbones warmer, his voice deeper, a whisper. 'Diaphragm put away?'

Amanda could barely breathe, the moment was so ripe. 'Put away.'

'We're makin' a baby?'

'Tonight.' They had deliberately waited the year, so that they could have each other for an uninterrupted time before their lives inevitably changed.

'If this house was ours' — his whisper was more hoarse — 'where would you...?'

'In the breakfast nook in the kitchen,' she whispered back. 'Then, years from now, we'd look at each other over the heads of the kids and have our little secret. What about you?'

'The backyard. Out in the woods, away from the neighbors. It'll be like our first time all over again.'

But it wasn't their first time. They had been married a year, and they had pressing dreams. 'This house is perfect, Gray. This *neighborhood* is perfect. Did you see the tree houses and swing sets? These are nice people with kids. Can we afford to live here?'

'No. But we will.'

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They celebrated their second anniversary by seeing Amanda's gynecologist. They had been making love without benefit of birth control for a year, and no baby had come of it. After months of denial, months of reassuring each other that it was only a matter of time, they were starting to wonder if something was wrong.

After examining Amanda, the doctor pronounced her healthy, then repeated the verdict when Graham joined them. Only when Graham flashed Amanda a broad smile and pulled her close did she allow herself to be relieved. 'I was frightened,' she told the doctor, sheepish now that the worst had been denied. 'People tell awful stories.'

'Don't listen.'

'That's sometimes easier said than done.' The worst storytellers were her sisters-in-law, and what could she do? She couldn't turn and walk away when they were talking, and it wasn't as if they spoke from personal experience. Their stories were about friends, or friends of friends. O'Learys didn't have trouble making babies. Amanda and Graham were an anomaly.

The doctor sat back in his chair, fingers laced over his middle in a fatherly way. 'I've been at this for more than thirty years, so I know what problems look like. The only one I see here is impatience.'

'Do you blame us?' Graham asked. 'Amanda's thirty-two. I'm thirty-eight.'

'And married two years, you say? Trying for a baby for just one? That's not very long.' He glanced at the notes he had scrawled earlier. 'I'd wonder if it was stress, but you both seem happy with your work. Yes?'

'Yes,' they both said. It had been another banner year.

'And you enjoy living in Woodley?'

'Very much,' Graham said. 'The house is a dream.'

'Same with the neighbors,' Amanda added. 'There are six kids, with great parents. There's an older couple — 'She stopped short and gave Graham a stricken look.

He pulled her closer. 'June just died,' he told the doctor. 'She was diagnosed with cancer and gone six weeks later. She was only sixty.'

Amanda still felt the shock of it. 'I barely knew June a year, but I loved her. Everyone did. She was like a mother — better than a mother. You could tell her anything. She'd listen and hear and make solutions seem simple. Ben's lost without her.'

'And what did June say about your getting pregnant?' the doctor asked.

Amanda didn't deny having discussed it with her. 'She said to be patient, that it would happen.'

The doctor nodded. 'It will. Truly, you do look fine. Everything is where it should be. Your cycle is regular. We know you're ovulating.'

'But it's been a year. The books say — '

'Close the books,' he ordered. 'Take your husband home and have fun.'

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For their third anniversary, Amanda and Graham drove into Manhattan to see a specialist. He was actually their third doctor. The first had fallen by the wayside when he kept insisting that nothing was wrong — and it wasn't that Amanda and Graham were convinced that there was, just that they thought a few tests were in order. So they met with the second, a local fertility specialist. He blamed their problem on age.

'Fine,' Graham said, voicing the frustration he and Amanda shared, 'so how do we deal with it?'

The man shrugged. 'You can't turn back the clock.'

Amanda reworded the question. 'How do you treat...older couples who want to have kids?'

Graham gawked at her. 'Older couples? We average out at thirty-six. That's not old.'

She held up a hand, bidding him to let the doctor answer.

'There are definitely things you can do,' the man said. 'There's AI. There's IUI and ICSI. If all else fails, there's IVF.'

'Translate,' Graham ordered.

'Yes, please,' Amanda added.

'Haven't you read up on this yet?' the doctor asked. 'Most couples in your situation would have done research.'

Amanda was taken aback. 'The last doctor we saw kept saying nothing was wrong. He told us just to keep on doing what we were doing and not to worry about special procedures.'

'Do you want a baby, or don't you?' It was less question than statement, and wasn't spoken harshly, but it had that effect.

Graham stood. 'This isn't a good match.'

Amanda agreed. They needed someone who was understanding, not judgmental.

The doctor shrugged. 'Go to ten others, and you'll hear the same thing. The options are artificial insemination, intrauterine insemination, intracytoplasmic sperm injection, and in vitro fertilization. The procedures get more expensive as you progress from one to the next. Likewise, you get older and less apt to conceive.'

When Graham caught Amanda's eye and hitched his chin toward the door, she was by his side in a flash, which was how they found themselves in New York on their third anniversary. Seeming empathetic and resourceful, this newest doctor started with a battery of tests, some of which, for the first time, were on Graham. When the immediate results showed nothing amiss, he gave them a pile of reading matter and a folder filled with instructions and charts. Assuring them that he didn't expect any surprises from the results of the remaining tests, he sent them home with a regimen that had Amanda identifying her fertile periods by charting her body temperature, and Graham maximizing his sperm count by allowing at least two days to pass between ejaculations.

They joked about it during the drive back to Woodley, but their laughter held an edge. Inevitably, making love wasn't as carefree as it used to be. Increasingly, the goal of making a baby was coming before pleasure. With that goal unrealized month after month, their uneasiness grew.

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They spent their fourth anniversary quietly. Amanda was recovering from minor surgery performed by yet another doctor. This one was female, and ran a fertility clinic thirty minutes south of Woodley. She was in her forties, mother to three children under the age of six, and disgusted with colleagues of hers who blamed things they couldn't diagnose on emotions, as finally the doctor in Manhattan had done. This one insisted that they call her by her first name — Emily — and not only asked questions none of the others had, but did different tests. That was how she noticed a small blockage in one of Amanda's tubes, and while she wasn't sure that it was severe enough to be causing the problem, she advised a precautionary cleanup.

Amanda and Graham readily agreed. By now they had hoped to have three children — Tyler, Emma, and Hal — born in three consecutive years. As things stood, the house that they loved for family space was starting to feel too large and much too still. And though they tried not to obsess about it, there were times when each wondered whether children would ever come.

There was no lovemaking on this fourth anniversary. Amanda was still too tender for that, and even without the surgery, the timing wouldn't have been right for sex. So it was a morning for gentle exchanges. Graham brought her breakfast in bed and gave her a pair of heart-shaped earrings; she told him she loved him and gave him a book on exotic shrubs. Then he went off to work.

Indeed, work was the good news on their fourth anniversary. O'Leary Landscape Design flourished. Graham now rented a suite of rooms in the center of Woodley to house two full-time assistants and a business manager. He was given preference for the best materials in the three largest nurseries in western Connecticut, had ongoing relationships with tree farms in Washington and Oregon, and shrub farms in the Carolinas. He kept two of Will's crews busy planting on a regular basis.

For her part, Amanda had been named coordinating psychologist for the Woodley school system, which gave her the power to bring a slightly antiquated system into the modern day. That meant getting to know students in nonthreatening situations such as leadership seminars, lunch groups, and community service programs. It meant opening the door to her office, allowing for five-minute sessions as well as forty-five-minute ones, and communicating with students by e-mail, if that was the only way they could handle a psychologist. It meant working with consulting psychologists on difficult cases and with lawyers on matters of confidentiality. It meant forming and training a crisis team.

So she and Graham had their house, their jobs, their neighborhood, and their love. The only thing that would have enhanced their fourth anniversary celebration was a child.

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Two months shy of their fifth anniversary, with Amanda feeling more like an egg-producing robot than a woman, she and Graham met for lunch. They talked about work, about the weather, about sandwich choices. They didn't talk about what Amanda had done that morning — which was to have an ultrasound that had measured her egg follicles — or the afternoon's activity — which would entail Graham producing fresh sperm and Amanda being artificially inseminated. They had already failed the procedure once. This was their second of three possible tries.

A short time later that day, Amanda lay alone in a sterile clinic room. Graham had done his part and gone back to work. Emily had poked her head in with a greeting on her way down the hall. After what seemed an interminable wait, a technician Amanda didn't know entered the room. Amanda figured she couldn't have been more than twenty-one, and 'technician' was the proper word. The girl had neither social skills nor personal warmth, and Amanda was too nervous to make more than a brief attempt at conversation. When that attempt got no response, she simply stared at the ceiling while the girl injected Graham's sperm. Once that was done, she was left alone.

Amanda knew the drill. She would lie there for twenty minutes with her pelvis tipped up to give the sperm a nudge in the right direction. Then she would dress, go home, and live with her heart in her mouth for the next ten days, wondering if this time it would take.

But today, lying there alone with Graham's silent sperm, Amanda felt a pang in her chest. She wanted to think it was a mystical something telling her that a baby was at that instant starting its nine-month intrauterine life, but she knew better. This pang came from fear.

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