

Suivant

by Michael Mullin

Chapter 1

Wendy Watts had driven Interstate 95 countless times, but never this far north. She exited onto route 111 and headed northeast toward her parents' new home in Biddeford, Maine, a town introduced from a distance by a gold-domed clock-tower. In her brief research on the town a few nights ago, she was pleased to discover that building was City Hall. It looked like the kind of building in many towns that *used to be* City Hall but now was office space or a Bed, Bath & Beyond.

"Turn right onto Pool Street," Evelyn told her. Evelyn was the name Wendy had given her phone's navigation app. She somewhat subconsciously chose the British-accented voice to instill more trust and confidence in the directions given. They had a secret, sometimes tempestuous, but ultimately amiable relationship.

"In a minute," Wendy replied aloud. "Just gonna check this place out." She turned left and almost immediately heard the app chime in that way that's designed to sound like: *Oopsie! No problem. We can fix this*, when it's really saying: *Seriously? Try to be a better listener. I can't be much clearer about right and left.*

Wendy ignored Evelyn trying to get her back on track during the little detour. Instead she took in the scene of red maples and cottonwoods standing guard between the brick buildings in the mini parks that occupied half blocks here and there. Streetlamp banners proudly informed

her Biddeford was established in 1630. She couldn't help but be reminded of the Connecticut town she grew up in, only this place was smaller and even more New England quaint.

She could almost hear Evelyn sigh relief when she got back onto Pool Street heading in the correct, eastward direction. After two blocks the buildings began to look residential, but many were still businesses: a restaurant here, a bookstore there, and a freshly painted green and yellow place whose sign out front read *Wilson & Geller, Attorneys at Law*. Next door to that, set further back off the street, was a charming Victorian house, painted the dark gray of a dolphin's back with bone-white and maroon accent trim. The porch spanned the front façade and turned around the left side out of sight. There was a small balcony on the second floor, its white-post railing upstaging the glass-paned French doors that led inside to whatever upstairs room that was. The unusual-for-the-neighborhood front yard was a small green rectangle bordered with beds of coneflower, lily of the valley, and catmint. The place looked to Wendy like some Americana painting come to life, and she concluded that her parents would indeed be happy here.

Robert and Linda Watts claimed they'd come to this little Maine town to retire, but Wendy quickly learned the plan involved opening this five-bedroom house as a bed & breakfast inn. She tried to explain to them that starting a business from scratch was literally the opposite of retiring, but they just smiled and told her it was something they'd always wanted to do. Robert had built a respectable career in financial management, and Linda was Human Resources Director for a national retail company. They had plenty of money and didn't need what her dad cracked himself up referring to as the "inn-come" with extra emphasis on the first syllable, drawing out the "n" so everyone would definitely get the joke.

“You have arrived at your destination,” Evelyn informed her despite it being obvious. Wendy imagined how nice it might be to have a friend with her right now. She wouldn’t even have to be British, just caring enough to help her through the weekend. She pulled onto the cobblestone driveway which rolled out invitingly on the right side of the house. Just then her phone rang, startling her, but not so much that she didn’t muse it was maybe Evelyn calling to ask how she could help.

It was a client. “Peter,” she said into the empty space of the car, sounding cheery. Her business voice. “What’s up?”

“Sorry to call you.” The nasally tenor came out the car speakers and enveloped her. “I know you said you were getting away this weekend.”

“No problem,” she lied, then repeated: “What’s up?”

“Your report. Just a heads up. I’m just getting a lot of pushback from the executive team,” Peter said, sounding like a child wanting a bedtime extension.

“What do you mean pushback?” Wendy asked. She hated pulling teeth like this. Why can’t people in professional conversations just say what they want to say?

“Everyone really wants to do this, and it seems like your report is saying we shouldn’t.”

“You hired me,” she said keeping the professional tone. “You know how this works. My report doesn’t say it’s a bad idea. It says the execution plan as it stands now isn’t going to get the results your team thinks it will. You don’t need a new idea. You need a new plan.”

“The focus group loved it,” he argued.

“They loved *the idea*,” she reminded him. She swallowed an exasperated sigh before continuing: “The numbers aren’t there, Peter. Your gender-based approach isn’t going to cut it with this younger demographic. The world isn’t pink and blue anymore. You wanna talk

pushback? This could cause irreparable damage to your brand.” She waited through a few moments of silence. “It’s all in the report,” she said. “No one there needs me to read it to them.”

“I know,” he said.

“Look,” she said. “Compile all the ‘pushback’ and your questions. We’ll meet early next week when I’m back. Rushing forward is a mistake. I wish I could tell you what you want to hear, but that’s not what you pay me for.”

“True,” he said. “It’s just . . . I know we’ve worked together for a long time, but the new guy running things here?”

“Yeah,” she said. “I met him.”

“He’s . . . bringing in his own researchers.”

“Oh,” Wendy said. Or thought. She didn’t know which. She’d lost two clients in the past few months due to their budget cuts. She had a couple of leads, but nothing all that promising. Being let go here would be bad. “I appreciate you telling me,” she managed.

“I thought you should know. Again, sorry for the call. Hope you have a nice weekend.”

“You too,” she said and hung up. She grabbed her bag from the backseat and turned toward the house, surprised to see her parents were already outside on the porch waving their excited hellos, looking like newsreel footage from the 1940s when soldiers were returning from war. Her dad wore khaki pants and a mostly red flannel shirt. Mom was in jeans and a lightweight, beige sweater with an argyle pattern at the neckline. It was their style to always look like they were on a break from an LL Bean catalog photo shoot.

“Look who’s here!” her mom shouted. Wendy put on a happy mask and waved back. She walked to the bottom of the steps, trying to push the shock and fog of what just happened on the phone out of her mind. As she started up the wooden steps, she noticed the left-side handrail

was new, not yet painted. Her parents had moved above her at the tops, waiting with outstretched arms. She hadn't seen them in a few months, and they looked good, full of a certain vitality, which Wendy assumed might be common in recently retired people.

They hugged and smiled, and her dad said "You look great, Honey! Healthy!" He always said that after not seeing her for a while. Wendy had no idea if the sentiment were true, but he certainly seemed to believe it, and that was enough for her to dip her head into his chest in appreciation.

Robert led the way inside, and Wendy found herself in a small foyer area, not really a room. There was a metal coatrack and small empty console table to their left. On the right side of the space in front of them was an oak staircase that went up out of sight. All the wood, the floors, stairs and railings, were stained the brown of a Hershey bar with just enough polish to catch the overhead light fixture, which was sculpted bronze, some sort of leafy pattern, a little too ornate for Wendy's taste, but she guessed her mom loved it.

"Just leave your bag on the stairs," Linda said. "We'll take it when we go up."

Wendy obeyed, letting the shoulder strap slide down her arm and catching it in her hand just in time to ensure a soft landing on the first step. As it landed, she peeked to her right into a parlor room that was completely devoid of furniture. Just a large oval rug with a geometric border pattern. The bay window looking out onto the porch where they just were. "It's really beautiful pulling in," she said. "Major curb appeal. "And I love the town. So charming."

"You drove around?" her dad asked.

"Just a quick lap."

"Let's have the tour!" her mom called.

“First,” Robert said putting a finger in the air, “do you need anything? We have iced tea, water of course, and also beer or wine?”

“I’m good for now,” Wendy told him. “Let’s see the place.”

“Well there’s that room,” Linda said with a shrug, motioning to the parlor. “Haven’t decided what to do there yet.”

“Looks like it would fit a pool table,” Wendy remarked.

“That’s what I said!” Robert beamed.

“I figured,” said Wendy, poking him in his ribs.

“You two,” Linda sighed, shaking her head as she led the way past the stairs and down the hall. “This . . .” she called back waiting for them to join her, “. . . is the dining room.”

Wendy entered the large room with its near-black, rectangular table and eight matching chairs. Without warning she felt wave of sadness wash over her. It was all she could do to keep from bursting into tears. What was going on? She turned to her dad, hoping that she didn’t look panicked. “Actually,” she said. “Do you have a wine open?”

“I will when I open it,” her dad said then ducked out toward what was obviously the kitchen.

Wendy turned to her mom. “Bathroom? In the excitement, I forgot.”

“Yes, of course! Right through there.”

Behind the locked door, Wendy did her best to pull herself together. What the hell was that? It only took her a moment to figure it out. Her whole adult life, even the pseudo-adult time when she was a college student, visiting her parents was also a nostalgic return to her own past. Their house. Her room. The yard. The town. Everything. Including what turned out to be the

trigger just now: *their* dining room, not this strange one with its block table. Their dining room table was oval and only sat six. Each of the legs had a natural curve with a wood-carved, ornamental sphere at its center. She and Cindy called them the “knobby knees.” How could you eat at a dining room table that didn’t have knobby knees?

As part of their “new chapter” plan, her parents had bought this place furnished and sold off most of their own stuff. Wendy, of course, knew this, but hadn’t taken the time to consider how the emptiness and loss would affect her. Did they know they were erasing the family past in this way? Did they do it on purpose? It couldn’t be because of Cindy. That was so long ago.

She was overreacting. Maybe the call from stupid Peter and his stupid pushback and even stupider news of getting let go was affecting her more than she cared to admit. Losing this client meant she might have to borrow money from her parents. She didn’t want to do that, and she certainly didn’t want it to be any part of this weekend. They’ll think that’s why she agreed to visit. She could sell some stock and live tight for three months (two-and-a-half, maybe). That would at least give her time to find more work.

How long had she been in the bathroom? Too long? She figured no because her mother was definitely the type who would knock and ask if everything was alright. She turned her thoughts to the glass of wine waiting for her not far from here, took a deep breath, and flushed the toilet for narrative’s sake. She checked her smile in the mirror to confirm it looked natural, although it was as contrived as her phone voice with her client. Feeling so tired of only being herself to herself, she went out to rejoin her parents.

The continued tour felt to Wendy as if it were happening underwater. The house was objectively magnificent, and her parents were clearly happy to be there. With the help of the wine, Wendy was able to engage throughout, commenting about the natural light and the

impressively modernized kitchen. She was eager to get through this part and get to the actual visit. She had offered to help with the startup of their business, but they said it was all taken care of. They were intent on her having “a weekend vacation stay,” as her mom put it.

They went upstairs, which was simply a hallway with a bathroom at one end, three bedroom doors along the length, and a fourth at the other end, which was the front of the house. Even before they opened the door, Wendy had figured out that this room had the small balcony she’d seen from the driveway. It was the biggest room, and her parents had the idea to charge a little more for a stay here.

“But you can have it free of charge all weekend,” her dad said.

“Gee, thanks!” Wendy said, smiling. She realized in consecutive moments that she’d forgotten to grab her bag on the stairs, and that her dad had carried it up. He set it down gently on the bed. “Thank you,” she said. He responded with a subtle, “of course” grin.

“We’re calling this the Lantern Room,” he said proudly. “Because of the view.”

“Go see,” Linda prompted.

Wendy opened the French doors, which stuck a little, and stepped outside into the cool evening air. She saw city hall to the right and leaning just a bit looking left she could see all the way to a marina and the ocean beyond that. “Wow,” she said. “Very nice. What’s a lantern room?”

“Top of the lighthouse,” Robert said.

“Oh, cool,” Wendy said. It still felt so odd that her parents lived here, but she liked it for them.

They ordered sandwiches from a local shop Robert and Linda already loved. “The bread alone,” Robert gushed. “They don’t even have to put anything in between.”

“But they do, right?” Wendy teased.

“Anything you want, dear,” he said.

While Linda set the table, and “tidied up a bit,” Robert and Wendy walked the three blocks to pick up the order. It was back toward town, the way Wendy had come in, so she took in the scene again, this time at a much slower pace. A man passing by on foot greeted Robert by name, and then a couple sitting on their front porch called out hello to him. Three blocks. Wendy smiled to herself, unsurprised. They hadn’t even been here a month yet. Another week or so, and her dad could run for mayor if he wanted. He’d always been so personable, so likable. Wendy figured it was a trait that must skip a generation like male pattern baldness.

“How’s everything going with your work?” he asked.

“It’s good,” she replied, not at all phased by the imminent topic. “Clients come and go. A lot of them are getting more budget conscious.”

“Are you expensive?”

“Depends on who you ask.”

He laughed, and they arrived at Jimmy B’s Sandwich Shop, an adorable little place with three two-seater bistro tables out front. They were metal framed with colorful mosaic tile tops. Inside, a man in his late fifties, his curly, salt and pepper hair cut short, greeted Robert like an old friend. Wendy correctly assumed this was Jimmy B himself, and Robert wasted no time introducing his daughter with beaming pride.

“She’s a market research expert,” he told the man. “Owns her own consulting firm.”

“Impressive,” said Jimmy with raised eyebrows. “Maybe I could hire you.”

“Well,” Wendy said, “you’re two-for-two on rave reviews, and I imagine soon to be three-for-three.”

“That’s what we like to hear!” he said, then turned to Robert. “What about a soda for Linda?”

Robert looked surprised. “Good call. I almost forgot,” he said as he retreated to the large refrigerator case against the side wall. He came back with a clear bottle that looked to Wendy more like beer than soda. “Your mother’s new favorite thing,” he said and showed her the bottle. Vanilla Crème soda from Tinton’s, a brand Wendy had never heard of. “You want one?” her dad asked. “They have lots of flavors.”

“God no,” Wendy said. “Thanks, but the sugar.”

“Fair enough,” Robert said.

On the walk home, Robert carried the bag. Wendy thought to offer, but knew he wouldn’t like that. She would only carry the bag if he were too old to handle it, and neither of them believed that to be true. “Hey,” he said suddenly. “Did you see Senator Dawson co-authored that bill on all kinds of radical education reform? Getting a lot of support. And some press, too.”

“I didn’t,” Wendy said, “but I’ll look it up. That’s great.”

Wendy’s first real job was a summer during college when she worked for the campaign of then would-be State Senator Ben Dawson. She tracked polling and worked in communications, learning many of the professional skills she still puts to use on a weekly basis. She found it so satisfying and rewarding when he won the election. It was a tangible, professional payoff she’d never been able to replicate. Now Dawson was a U.S. Senator from Massachusetts, and although she had nothing to do with that campaign, his rise in the political world was something she and her dad always shared.

After dinner they took fresh glasses of wine to the living room, a darker but inviting space with a fireplace. During the tour Wendy recognized the couch and matching chair (no way Robert was giving that up) from their old house. Robert sat in his chair and Linda on the couch, but Wendy wandered to the mantle first, looking at the familiar framed photographs: Her college graduation. Mom and Dad with Uncle Brian and Aunt Maria at somebody's wedding, the Caribbean view from the St. John condo they'd owned for years of her childhood. And of course, speaking of childhood, the signature family-memory photo of Wendy and Cindy on that double slide in that park on Cape Cod. Halfway through their descent, their faces wide with glee, they are reaching across the space between the slides and holding hands with one another.

"I want to get your take on something," Linda asked.

By way of reply, Wendy not only turned her attention to her mother, but came over and sat on the couch with her.

Linda continued: "I'm trying to decide how to divide up the space into private and that for guests. I don't even know how to decorate. Is it ok to have personal family photos, or should those be out of sight? I mean we have our bedroom, of course, and the office."

"And the kitchen," Robert added.

"Yes, the kitchen. Guests won't be going in there. But what about this room?"

"I'm not sure," Wendy said, giving the question some thought. Was it unusual for a bed and breakfast inn? She had no idea. "What do other inns look like?" she asked.

Robert and Linda looked at each, then to Wendy, shrugging and shaking their heads. Wendy smiled. "Before deciding to start this business, did you ever stay in a bed and breakfast? Maybe see what it was like from a guest perspective? Maybe chat with the owners?"

"Of course we have," Robert said.

“Oh, that was years ago,” Linda confessed.

“Decades, actually,” said Robert.

Wendy sighed. “I can poke around for you, find out some things.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that,” Linda said.

“Mom, it’s what I do for a living.”

“Then we insist on paying you,” Robert said.

“We’ll see about that,” Wendy chuckled. “It does make sense that your guests have some sitting space. What about the parlor room up front? Make this room yours.”

“That’s what we were thinking,” Robert said. “But we’re afraid it’s too small. And we can’t switch and take that room because you see it as soon as you walk in.”

“It’s not that small,” Wendy said. “what is the maximum number of guests you can have? Eight, right? And I can’t imagine a full house will be all that common.”

Robert shrugged again.

Wendy laughed and shook her head. “Did you research this venture *at all*?”

Linda sat up straighter. “We had the railing on the front steps replaced.”

“Lawsuit waiting to happen,” Robert added.

Wendy laughed again. “Ok, then. The parlor room will be for guests.” She hesitated then decided to go with the joke: “Besides, who doesn’t like to play pool?”

Robert laughed.

“We are *not* getting a pool table,” Linda said with pretend sternness before smiling herself.

At bedtime, Wendy made her way up to her room. She could only remember one other time being in a bed and breakfast inn like this one. It was over ten years ago, and she was with Rob, the marine biology graduate student she thought she was going to marry but (thankfully) didn't. The memory of that weekend came back a bit stronger than she would have liked because this quaint little room had an almost déjà vu similarity to it. She couldn't help but wonder if all such lodgings across the New England states had some sort of furniture/décor code to which they must adhere. The mahogany four-poster bed carved with the same swirling leaf pattern found on the edges of the nightstand and the dresser. The overstuffed mattress with tricolor crocheted blanket folded neatly across the foot. The stenciled wallpaper depicted a repeat scene pattern of what looked like a busy blacksmith shop. And the two white ceramic lamps identical except for their size. The larger one was on the dresser and the smaller stood precariously close to the edge of the nightstand.

She changed into her nightshirt, a well-worn, oversized David Bowie concert T-shirt from a show she did not attend. She took out her laptop with the idea of going over the report sent to her now-former client. She figured she could easily anticipate what the "pushback" was and thought she might formulate a response. Once the screen lit up, however, her third glass of wine from downstairs said: "Nice try," and she put the laptop away. What did it matter anyway?

She thought about this house, wondering if it would ever feel like a home to her. She knew it would never be *her* home, but how long would it take for her to visit and have some sense of familiarity? Should she visit more often to speed up that timeline? And wouldn't it be even harder to adopt this house given the fact that on any visit, there might be random strangers here? The whole situation was just so weird, but she resolved to give her parents this happiness and share in it as much as she could.

She thought about the picture of her and Cindy on that double-slide. She didn't remember the actual moment. They were too young, but she'd been told the when and the where. It was fall, which she could have inferred because of their matching striped sweaters. Of course, she'd seen the photo a million times. She even had a copy that she'd always meant to get framed but never did.

That's when it hit her. The reason she never framed it was the same reason her mother had asked her advice on the décor. As much as they want to have their memories on display, some are private. It was totally conceivable, probable even, that inn guests would see that picture and innocently inquire about it. The same was true for anyone in Wendy's apartment. "That's so cute! Is that you?" What does Wendy say in response to that?

Yes, that's me and my twin sister Cindy. When we were eleven, she was abducted walking home from school. We never found her, and after two months, we were advised to assume she was dead. No one was ever arrested. She's the one on the left.