Prologue

The Flood Mansion

San Francisco

Standing before the gathering at her mother’s memorial service, Natalie Harper glanced down at the podium. On the angled surface was a folder titled “Resources for the Grieving,” along with her notes. The guide was a compendium of advice, but there was one thing it failed to explain: How was she supposed to go on after this?

Natalie had been carrying the pages around for days, hoping she’d somehow find an explanation for the inexplicable, or a way to express the inexpressible. But all the notes and resources in the world failed to penetrate the unfinished narrative of her mother’s life, which seemed to dangle in the thin air of Natalie’s grief, just out of reach. The words shimmered in a wet blur before her eyes.

She tried to remember what she meant to say—as if she could sum up Blythe Harper’s life in a three-minute speech. What did you say at your mother’s final farewell? That she had been with you every minute of your life from the second you took your first breath until a week ago, when she had left forever. That she was beautiful and inspiring. Brilliant, but often foolish. Quirky and infuriating. Complicated and beloved. That she was everything—a mother, a daughter, a friend, a bookseller, a purveyor of dreams.

And that, at the moment Natalie had needed her most, Blythe Harper had fallen from the sky.

Part One

Do not fear death, but rather the unlived life. You don’t have to live forever, you just have to live.

—Tuck Everlasting

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Archangel, Sonoma County, California

One week earlier

This was a big moment for Natalie. The biggest in her career so far, for sure. The whole company had gathered in the reception hall of Pinnacle Fine Wines to celebrate her promotion and the million-dollar deal she’d made for the firm. But her own mother was a no-show.

True to form.

To be fair, the drive from the city up to Archangel could be unpredictable in the afternoon. It was equally possible that Blythe Harper had completely forgotten that she’d promised to show up to celebrate her daughter’s achievement.

Natalie pasted on a smile and smoothed her hands down the front of her blazer, a tailored, conservative piece she wore over the white silk pussy-bow blouse she’d splurged on for the occasion. Meanwhile, she tracked the company owner, Rupert Carnaby, as he made his way to the podium at the dais, pausing to greet colleagues along the way. Then she glanced at the door, half hoping her mom would come dashing through at the last minute.

The other half knew better.

Natalie reminded herself that she was a grown woman, not some kid who needed her mommy to show up for a school event. Not that Blythe had done that, either.

Although she didn’t consciously keep score, Natalie knew her mother had missed many things in her life, from her Brownie investiture ceremony to the California Mathletics championship to her graduation from college. There was always a reason—she couldn’t leave the shop, a sales rep was coming in, she couldn’t find a car to borrow, she had an event with a VIP author—all good reasons, the kind Natalie would feel petty for disputing.

Whatever, Natalie thought, shifting from foot to foot in her fashionable but uncomfortable midheel pumps. It’s fine. Her mom would have an excuse and Natalie would be fine with it. That was the way it always worked. And to be fair, her mother—who had raised Natalie alone—rarely had a moment to spare away from the bookstore. She’d run it almost single-handedly for the past thirty-three years, often lacking the wherewithal for backup help.

Mandy McDowell, Natalie’s coworker in logistics, milled past, a glass of wine in hand as she regaled a colleague with yet another story about her adorable but ill-behaved kids.

Too late, Natalie realized Mandy wasn’t watching where she was going. Natalie failed to step away in time, and Mandy’s glass of wine sloshed into her.

“Oh my God, Natalie,” Mandy exclaimed, her eyes wide with distress. “I didn’t see you there. Oh shoot, I am so, so sorry!”

Natalie plucked the white silk blouse away from her body. “Great,” she muttered, grabbing a napkin and blotting at the splash of red wine.

“Club soda to the rescue.” Mandy’s friend Cheryl bustled forward with a napkin and a bottle. “Here, let me help.”

While Natalie held her blouse away from her also-stained bra, Mandy and Cheryl dabbed at the large blot. “I’m such a horrible klutz,” Mandy said. “Can you ever forgive me? God, you shouldn’t. And today of all days, just as you’re about to go up to the podium . . .”

“It was an accident,” Natalie conceded, trying to keep her cool. Trying to minimize the situation.

“Promise you’ll send me the cleaning bill,” Mandy said. “And if the stain won’t come out, I’m totally buying you a new blouse.”

“Fair enough,” Natalie murmured. She knew her coworker wouldn’t make good on the promise. Mandy, a single mom, was perpetually broke. She always seemed to be scrambling to stay on top of her bills. Judging by her eyelash extensions and nail job, she didn’t mind splurging on self-care. Yet she was always short on cash.

Don’t judge, Natalie reminded herself. People have their reasons.

Mandy regarded her with dewy-eyed sympathy. “Oh hey, I thought your mom was coming up from the city today.”

Natalie gritted her teeth, then forced her jaw to relax. “Yeah, not sure what happened. Traffic, maybe. Or could be something came up at the bookstore. She always has a hard time getting away.”

“Are you sure you told her this whole party is in your honor?”

“She knows,” Natalie murmured. Mandy was so very sincere, but her questions were not helping.

“And what about Rick? Wouldn’t your boyfriend want to be here on your big day?”

“He had a test flight he couldn’t get out of,” Natalie said.

“Oh, that’s too bad. Guess he’s moving up the ranks at Aviation Innovations. When the two of us were dating, he never had a conflict if I had a big event on the calendar.” Mandy and Rick had dated before Natalie had moved to Archangel. They were still friends, a point Mandy liked to make with annoying frequency. Now she whipped out her phone. “Here, I’ll text him a picture so he’ll see what he’s missing.”

Leaving no time for objections, Mandy snapped a picture of Natalie’s unflattering, openmouthed expression, and she hit send before Natalie could stop her.

Thanks, she thought. And then: It’s not a big day. It’s a job, is all. She eyed her coworkers, snacking on amuse-bouches and refilling their wine goblets at the open bar. Not one of life’s peak experiences.

Just then, the rapid clinking of a glass drew everyone’s attention to the podium.

“Good afternoon, everyone,” said Rupert, leaning toward the mic and surveying the gathering with his trademark boyish grin. “And by good, I mean great. And by afternoon, I mean happy hour.”

A murmur of chuckles rippled through the crowd. “I wanted to take just a little time to celebrate today. Now, Natalie Harper needs no introduction because you all know her, but I’d like to say a few words. Natalie!” Rupert gestured. “Get your good self up here and join me.”

She felt a blush coming on as she buttoned her blazer, knowing the wine stain would still be visible above the lapels. Her chest was clammy and damp, redolent of old-vine zin.

“A brief history, if you’ll indulge me,” Rupert began. One of his favorite things was to wax on about the background of the family wine distribution business. “When my grandmother Clothilde put me in charge of Pinnacle, she said, ‘You have one job.’” He did a spot-on imitation of his grandmother’s French accent. “‘To bring wine to the world, and to be excellent.’ And the way to do that is to work only with excellent colleagues.” He stood aside and gestured for Natalie to step up. “My friends, Natalie Harper embodies that mandate. So today, I give you our new vice president of digital inventory.”

A subdued smattering of applause accompanied her to the podium. Rupert beamed, his veneered teeth gleaming. In a small, petty corner of her mind, Natalie believed he knew she’d been keeping him afloat while he glad-handed with suppliers and accounts and played golf on company time. That was probably the real reason for this promotion.

“Thank you,” she said awkwardly, unused to being in the limelight. Spoken aloud, the new job title sounded geeky, or perhaps even slightly made-up. That was the nature of the field she was in, she supposed. She had chosen this job for its stability and marketability. There would always be a place for someone who could manage information technology and logistics, because those were matters that 99 percent of people had zero interest in and couldn’t stand doing.

Managing inventory was not like being a diplomat, a deep-sea diver, a winemaker, a bookseller—jobs people might actually enjoy. “I’m grateful for this opportunity,” she continued, “and I’m looking forward to what we can accomplish.”

Truth be told, she couldn’t stand the job, either, but that was not the point. The point was to have a steady career that would never let her down.

“Another bit of history,” Rupert said, winking at Natalie and taking the mic. “Once upon a time, this young lady came to me looking for a position here at the firm, and I, in my infinite wisdom, signed her up immediately.” He paused. “Now look at her—she’s got those puppy dog eyes, and the instincts of a barracuda, and probably more smarts than all of us combined. What she did with our inventory system was nothing short of a miracle. Thanks to Natalie taking the lead on this, we’ve had our biggest year ever here at Pinnacle.” He laughed. “Okay, yeah, I can see I’m boring you. So I will wrap this up with one final announcement. Governor Clements’s only daughter is getting married to the owner of Cast Iron.” Cast Iron, a group of wildly popular luxury restaurants, had been founded by a wildly popular internet star. His creative food and wine pairings were taking the foodie world by storm. “As you can imagine, it’s going to be the wedding of the year in our fair state.” Another pause. “What’s that got to do with us, you ask? Well, I’m going to have Natalie explain.”

She caught a whiff of herself as she took the mic. Spilled wine and nervous sweat. How lovely. “I’ll try to make a long story short. Pinnacle Wines now has an exclusive deal to supply the wine to Bitsy Clements’s wedding. And afterward, we’ll be the exclusive supplier to Cast Iron.”

Her words didn’t begin to convey the complicated and tense negotiations she had gone through. Natalie had driven her team to their limits, putting together the perfect combination of products and discount rates. The multimillion-dollar deal was nearly complete.

There was one more deadline to meet—the procurement of a rare Alsatian white wine the groom insisted on. Once that was confirmed, the details would be finalized. “I’d like to thank my team—Mandy, Cheryl, Dave, and Lana—for helping with the project.” That was a white lie, she privately conceded. The team had been an encumbrance every step of the way, requiring constant vigilance on her part.

“And with that, let’s all have a drink,” Rupert said, turning on the charm as he took over the mic again. He, too, had been challenging throughout the process. Though his intentions were good, he lacked the business and financial acumen needed to put together a complicated deal. He was happy enough to take credit, though, and decent enough to reward Natalie with a new position.

Glasses were raised. She gazed around the room at all the people talking and laughing, enjoying the view from the upper offices of the building.

With the promotion came a new office a good distance away from the cube farm where the inventory department resided. Now Natalie would have a corner space of her own. She had been eager to show it to her mother—a floor-to-ceiling window framing a forever view of the rolling Sonoma landscape, a refuge from the constant, unproductive chatter of her coworkers.

Rupert launched into more charming banter about the upcoming nuptials, which was already being compared, with hyperbolic enthusiasm, to a royal wedding. Natalie stepped down, took out her phone. Her daily affirmation flashed on the screen: I trust that I am on the right path.

She swiped it away and hit redial, but as expected, her mom’s phone went to voice mail: You’ve reached Blythe Harper of the Lost and Found Bookshop here in the heart of San Francisco’s historic district. Leave me a message. Better yet, come see me at the bookstore!

Natalie didn’t leave a message. Her mother rarely checked voice mail. Natalie sent a text—You didn’t miss much, just me getting red wine thrown on my shirt and being awkward at the mic.

Then she noticed a message awaiting her. She slipped out of the room, knowing no one would miss her. She had always been an under-the-radar type of person. She went down the hall, seeking the quiet of her new office. Most of her things were in boxes on the floor. She’d been hoping her mom would give her a hand organizing the place during her visit. Pausing at the window, she took a phone picture of the impressive view. Then she texted the photo to her mother. Even better in person, she wrote.

The voice mail was from Rick’s number. She cringed ever so slightly as she listened. Hey, babe, sorry to miss your big day, he’d said in his deep, friendly voice. Couldn’t get out of this test flight today. Looking forward to the weekend. Love you.

Did he? Did he love her? Did she love him?

A part of Natalie didn’t want to contemplate the answer, but if she was being completely honest with herself, she would have to concede that the spark had gone out for them a while ago.

On the surface, she and Rick seemed like the ideal couple—an ambitious wine executive and a busy aviation engineer and pilot. He was good-looking and came from a nice family. Yet one thin layer below the surface, there was a flat line of predictability. Sometimes she worried that the two of them were together simply because it was comfortable. If comfortable meant an unimaginative, unchallenging relationship.

It was possible that each was waiting for the other to end it.

She was stirred from her thoughts by the doorbell ding of an incoming email. It was probably a work-related matter that could wait until Monday, but she couldn’t not check her computer. And then she couldn’t not see the boldface subject line that nearly stopped her heart: Urgent: Licensing Deadline Missed.

What the hell?

She plunked down bonelessly in her ergonomic rolling office chair, feeling the blood drain from her face. The message was from Governor Clements’s executive social manager. Ms. Harper, I’m sorry to inform you that the licensing deadline from the Board of Equalization was missed and the agreement will be canceled pursuant to . . .

A silent scream built in Natalie’s chest. Missing an important deadline put the entire agreement at risk. How could this have happened?

In her gut, she knew. Mandy had been in charge of the filing. Natalie had drummed into her again and again that the hard deadline was crucial. Mandy had drummed back that she had it handled. Natalie had double-checked with her.

But she hadn’t triple-checked.

Holding in panic, she stabbed a number into the phone. This was the deal she had worked so hard to bring to fruition, competing fiercely with other suppliers for the wedding and franchise contracts.

If the deal fell through, Natalie would be faced with the decision about whether to protect Mandy from being fired. The woman made mistake after mistake, and typically, Natalie covered for her. Mandy was everyone’s favorite. Everyone’s pet. She was adorable, funny, charming, beloved.

Natalie practically strangled the phone in her hand as she contacted the state controller’s office and the district manager. It was a good thing her mother and Rick had skipped out after all. It would not be fun for them—or anyone—to see her scrambling to undo her coworker’s mistake.

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A tense hour later, Natalie had rescued the situation. She was drenched in sweat and red wine and shaken to her core as she ducked into the bathroom. Somehow she had managed to save Mandy’s ass—again. It had taken a great deal of groveling and an extra $10,000 in discounts—which Natalie knew would be taken out of her bonus.

In the stall, she didn’t puke, but she had the dry heaves. She took off her blazer and blouse. Both likely ruined. She couldn’t stand to wear the blouse another second, so she shoved it into the trash. Then she buttoned the blazer over her wine-spotted bra.

She was about to exit the stall when she heard the sound of a door swishing open.

“. . . see her face when Rupert was droning on?” The voice came from someone entering the bathroom. Mandy’s voice.

Natalie froze. She stopped breathing.

“Yeah,” said someone else. Mandy’s friend Cheryl. “That’s her resting bitch face. Thank God we don’t have to look at that every day anymore.”

“Right?” Mandy chuckled. “Her so-called promotion is the best thing that ever happened to us.”

“You think?”

“That nice corner office? HR put her there so no one has to hear her constant nagging. She won’t be in our faces anymore. So really, her only interactions will be with a spreadsheet. Perfect. I thanked Rupert personally for getting her out of the pit. Sweet freedom!”

Natalie heard a snicker and the sound of a high five. Two hands clapping.

“Cheers to that and cheers to no more toxic bosses.”

One of them started humming “Ding-Dong! The Witch Is Dead” as they both entered the other stalls.

Now Natalie really felt like puking. Instead, she made no sound as she fled from the restroom, praying they didn’t know she’d heard.

2

A shower and a change of clothes helped a little, but Natalie still felt devastated by what she’d overheard. Devastated, yet on some level unsurprised. She would never deny that she was precise. Orderly. Exacting of both herself and others.

Looking around her modest apartment, she admitted to a penchant for neatness.

But did that make her a horrible person?

Finger-combing her dark, curly hair, which was possibly the only unruly thing about her, she thought about her clean, paid-for hybrid car, her tidy home, her secure little life . . . and—the tiniest voice inside her whispered—the emptiness.

She didn’t know what might fill it up. She had created the home she’d lacked as a child—predictable, simple, neat. The apartment, while pleasant enough, was missing some essential quality she couldn’t quite pinpoint. It was in a pink stucco building as small and sweet as a cupcake, furnished with the things she liked to surround herself with—comfy chairs and shelves crammed with books, and a soft bed for curling up to read.

It should have been the right fit. It should have felt like home, like the place she belonged. Yet despite the idyllic Sonoma setting, surrounded by vineyards and apple orchards, the emptiness yawned. It never felt quite like home.

Certainly, the job wasn’t helping, despite her hard work and dedication to Pinnacle. Most days, her career felt like a grind. Somewhere along the way, she’d grown to hate the work. That, combined with the depressing thought that she and Rick were coming to an end, rolled over her in a fresh swell of nausea.

*Stop it*, she lectured herself. The promotion had come with a hefty raise and equity in the company. If she stayed on this path, she’d be set for life. Growing up in the bookstore with her flighty mother at the helm, that sense of security, of equilibrium, had been lacking.

Most days, she reflected, trying to power through the nausea, that was reason enough to stick with her job at Pinnacle.

She finished dressing in crop pants, a striped jersey top, and canvas sneakers. Trying to shrug off the unsettled feeling, she checked her phone. Her mom still hadn’t answered the text. Rick was still apparently flying somewhere.

There was a message from her friend Tess, though, inviting her over. The one bright spot in an otherwise completely crappy day.

She jumped into her little hybrid hatchback and drove toward Tess’s place. On the way, she stopped to grab a jar of honey from a roadside stand. Jamie Westfall, the owner, was a beekeeper who had moved to the area a few years back, alone and pregnant. She wasn’t alone anymore, though. She now had a little boy named Ollie.

As Natalie selected a pint jar with its save the bees label and stuck five dollars in the honor box, Ollie came outside. “Hiya, Miss Natalie,” he said.

“Hi, yourself. What’s up?”

Elaborate shrug. He was bashful in the most adorable way. “S’posed to be reading to my mom for homework.”

“How’s that going for you?”

Another shrug. His mother came out on the porch, a wisp of a girl in overalls and an embroidered peasant top. “He’s a good reader, but he’s super picky. He did love the last one you gave us—*One Family.”*

“Oh good, I’m glad you liked it. Wish that book had been around when I was your age, Ollie. Our family was just me and my mom and my grandpa, and it would have made me happy to read about all the different kinds of families. Not just families that had a mom, dad, kids, dog.” She counted them off on her fingers.

He tugged at his lower lip. “I like reading about dogs.”

“I’ll bring you a new book next time. There’s a good one called *Smells Like Dog.* Did I ever tell you my mom has a bookstore? I used to work there, and it gave me a superpower—picking out just the right book for just the right kid.”

“How come you don’t work there anymore?” asked Ollie.

“After the day I had, I’m asking myself that question,” Natalie admitted. “I’m heading over to visit Tess for some tea and sympathy.”

“I don’t like tea,” Ollie said. “What’s sympathy taste like?”

Natalie laughed and ruffled his hair, then got back in the car. “Like a melted marshmallow with chocolate sauce.”

“Maybe we’ll have that for dessert tonight,” Jamie said. They stood together on the porch and waved goodbye.

As she regarded Jamie and her child, Natalie couldn’t help but see how happy they were together. Every once in a while, she thought about kids and felt a tug of yearning. *All in good time*, she told herself.

She and Rick had once talked about kids. Correction: Rick had talked about kids. She’d listened. And doubted. They hadn’t brought it up again.

En route to Tess’s, other doubts crept in. *Was* Tess her friend, or had she taken Natalie in like a stray cat? After what she’d overheard at work, Natalie wasn’t so sure anymore. She wasn’t sure of anything.

Turning at the signs for Rossi Vineyards and Angel Creek Winery, she followed the long gravel lane. Like Natalie, Tess Delaney Rossi had been raised by a single mother and had been living in San Francisco before moving to Archangel. Yet unlike Natalie, Tess had settled in the small town to marry, following her heart, not a career.