

Nights in Rodanthe

One



Three years earlier, on a warm November morning in 1999, Adrienne Willis had returned to the Inn and at first glance had thought it unchanged, as if the small Inn were impervious to sun and sand and salted mist. The porch had been freshly painted, and shiny black shutters sandwiched rectangular white-curtained windows on both floors like offset piano keys. The cedar siding was the color of dusty snow. On either side of the building, sea oats waved a greeting, and sand formed a curving dune that changed imperceptibly with each passing day as individual grains shifted from one spot to the next.

With the sun hovering among the clouds, the air had a luminescent quality, as though particles of light were suspended in the haze, and for a moment Adrienne felt she'd traveled back in time. But look-

ing closer, she gradually began to notice changes that cosmetic work couldn't hide: decay at the corners of the windows, lines of rust along the roof, water stains near the gutters. The Inn seemed to be winding down, and though she knew there was nothing she could do to change it, Adrienne remembered closing her eyes, as if to magically blink it back to what it had once been.

Now, standing in the kitchen of her own home a few months into her sixtieth year, Adrienne hung up the phone after speaking with her daughter. She sat at the table, reflecting on that last visit to the Inn, remembering the long weekend she'd once spent there. Despite all that had happened in the years that had passed since then, Adrienne still held tight to the belief that love was the essence of a full and wonderful life.

Outside, rain was falling. Listening to the gentle tapping against the glass, she was thankful for its steady sense of familiarity. Remembering those days always aroused a mixture of emotions in her—something akin to, but not quite, nostalgia. Nostalgia was often romanticized; with these memories, there was no reason to make them any more romantic than they already were. Nor did she share these memories with others. They were hers, and over the years, she'd come to view them as a sort of museum exhibit, one in which she was both the curator and the only patron. And in an odd way, Adrienne had come to believe that she'd

learned more in those five days than she had in all the years before or after.

She was alone in the house. Her children were grown, her father had passed away in 1996, and she'd been divorced from Jack for seventeen years now. Though her sons sometimes urged her to find someone to spend her remaining years with, Adrienne had no desire to do so. It wasn't that she was wary of men; on the contrary, even now she occasionally found her eyes drawn to younger men in the supermarket. Since they were sometimes only a few years older than her own children, she was curious about what they would think if they noticed her staring at them. Would they dismiss her out of hand? Or would they smile back at her, finding her interest charming? She wasn't sure. Nor did she know if it was possible for them to look past the graying hair and wrinkles and see the woman she used to be.

Not that she regretted being older. People nowadays talked incessantly about the glories of youth, but Adrienne had no desire to be young again. Middle-aged, maybe, but not young. True, she missed some things—bounding up the stairs, carrying more than one bag of groceries at a time, or having the energy to keep up with the grandchildren as they raced around the yard—but she'd gladly exchange them for the experiences she'd had, and those came only with age. It was the fact that she could look back on life and realize she wouldn't have changed much at all that made sleep come easy these days.

Besides, youth had its problems. Not only did she remember them from her own life, but she'd watched her children as they'd struggled through the angst of adolescence and the uncertainty and chaos of their early twenties. Even though two of them were now in their thirties and one was almost there, she sometimes wondered when motherhood would become less than a full-time job.

Matt was thirty-two, Amanda was thirty-one, and Dan had just turned twenty-nine. They'd all gone to college, and she was proud of that, since there'd been a time when she wasn't sure any of them would. They were honest, kind, and self-sufficient, and for the most part, that was all she'd ever wanted for them. Matt worked as an accountant, Dan was the sportscaster on the evening news out in Greenville, and both were married with families of their own. When they'd come over for Thanksgiving, she remembered sitting off to the side and watching them scurry after their children, feeling strangely satisfied at the way everything had turned out for her sons.

As always, things were a little more complicated for her daughter.

The kids were fourteen, thirteen, and eleven when Jack moved out of the house, and each child had dealt with the divorce in a different way. Matt and Dan took out their aggression on the athletic fields and by occasionally acting up in school, but Amanda had been the most affected. As the middle

child sandwiched between brothers, she'd always been the most sensitive, and as a teenager, she'd needed her father in the house, if only to distract from the worried stares of her mother. She began dressing in what Adrienne considered rags, hung with a crowd that stayed out late, and swore she was deeply in love with at least a dozen different boys over the next couple of years. After school, she spent hours in her room listening to music that made the walls vibrate, ignoring her mother's calls for dinner. There were periods when she would barely speak to her mother or brothers for days.

It took a few years, but Amanda had eventually found her way, settling into a life that felt strangely similar to what Adrienne once had. She met Brent in college, and they married after graduation and had two kids in the first few years of marriage. Like many young couples, they struggled financially, but Brent was prudent in a way that Jack never had been. As soon as their first child was born, he bought life insurance as a precaution, though neither expected that they would need it for a long, long time.

They were wrong.

Brent had been gone for eight months now, the victim of a virulent strain of testicular cancer. Adrienne had watched Amanda sink into a deep depression, and yesterday afternoon, when she dropped off the grandchildren after spending some time with them, she found the drapes at their house drawn, the

porch light still on, and Amanda sitting in the living room in her bathrobe with the same vacant expression she'd worn on the day of the funeral.

It was then, while standing in Amanda's living room, that Adrienne knew it was time to tell her daughter about the past.



Fourteen years. That's how long it had been.

In all those years, Adrienne had told only one person about what had happened, but her father had died with the secret, unable to tell anyone even if he'd wanted to.

Her mother had passed away when Adrienne was thirty-five, and though they'd had a good relationship, she'd always been closest to her father. He was, she still thought, one of two men who'd ever really understood her, and she missed him now that he was gone. His life had been typical of so many of his generation. Having learned a trade instead of going to college, he'd spent forty years in a furniture manufacturing plant working for an hourly wage that increased by pennies each January. He wore fedoras even during the warm summer months, carried his lunch in a box with squeaky hinges, and left the house promptly at six forty-five every morning to walk the mile and a half to work.

In the evenings after dinner, he wore a cardigan sweater and long-sleeved shirts. His wrinkled pants

lent a disheveled air to his appearance that grew more pronounced as the years wore on, especially after the passing of his wife. He liked to sit in the easy chair with the yellow lamp glowing beside him, reading genre westerns and books about World War II. In the final years before his strokes, his old-fashioned spectacles, bushy eyebrows, and deeply lined face made him look more like a retired college professor than the blue-collar worker he had been.

There was a peacefulness about her father that she'd always yearned to emulate. He would have made a good priest or minister, she'd often thought, and people who met him for the first time usually walked away with the impression that he was at peace with himself and the world. He was a gifted listener; with his chin resting in his hand, he never let his gaze stray from people's faces as they spoke, his expression mirroring empathy and patience, humor and sadness. Adrienne wished that he were around for Amanda right now; he, too, had lost a spouse, and she thought Amanda would listen to him, if only because he knew how hard it really was.

A month ago, when Adrienne had gently tried to talk to Amanda about what she was going through, Amanda had stood up from the table with an angry shake of her head.

"This isn't like you and Dad," she'd said. "You two couldn't work out your problems, so you divorced. But I loved Brent. I'll always love Brent, and I lost

him. You don't know what it's like to live through something like that."

Adrienne had said nothing, but when Amanda left the room, Adrienne had lowered her head and whispered a single word.

Rodanthe.



While Adrienne sympathized with her daughter, she was concerned about Amanda's children. Max was six, Greg was four, and in the past eight months, Adrienne had noticed distinct changes in their personalities. Both had become unusually withdrawn and quiet. Neither had played soccer in the fall, and though Max was doing well in kindergarten, he cried every morning before he had to go. Greg had started to wet the bed again and would fly into tantrums at the slightest provocation. Some of these changes stemmed from the loss of their father, Adrienne knew, but they also reflected the person that Amanda had become since last spring.

Because of the insurance, Amanda didn't have to work. Nonetheless, for the first couple of months after Brent had died, Adrienne spent nearly every day at their house, keeping the bills in order and preparing meals for the children, while Amanda slept and wept in her room. She held her daughter whenever Amanda needed it, listened when Amanda wanted to talk, and forced her daughter to

spend at least an hour or two outside each day, in the belief that fresh air would remind her daughter that she could begin anew.

Adrienne had thought her daughter was getting better. By early summer, Amanda had begun to smile again, infrequently at first, then a little more often. She ventured out into the town a few times, took the kids roller-skating, and Adrienne gradually began pulling back from the duties she was shouldering. It was important, she knew, for Amanda to resume responsibility for her own life again. Comfort could be found in the steady routines of life, Adrienne had learned; she hoped that by decreasing her presence in her daughter's life, Amanda would be forced to realize that, too.

But in August, on the day that would have been her seventh wedding anniversary, Amanda opened the closet door in the master bedroom, saw dust collecting on the shoulders of Brent's suits, and suddenly stopped improving. She didn't exactly regress—there were still moments when she seemed her old self—but for the most part, she seemed to be frozen somewhere in between. She was neither depressed nor happy, neither excited nor languid, neither interested nor bored by anything around her. To Adrienne, it seemed as if Amanda had become convinced that moving forward would somehow tarnish her memories of Brent, and she'd made the decision not to allow that to happen.

But it wasn't fair to the children. They needed

her guidance and her love, they needed her attention. They needed her to tell them that everything was going to be all right. They'd already lost one parent, and that was hard enough. But lately, it seemed to Adrienne that they'd lost their mother as well.



In the gentle hue of the soft-lit kitchen, Adrienne glanced at her watch. At her request, Dan had taken Max and Greg to the movies, so she could spend the evening with Amanda. Like Adrienne, both of her sons were worried about Amanda's kids. Not only had they made extra efforts to stay active in the boys' lives, but nearly all of their recent conversations with Adrienne had begun or ended with the same question: *What do we do?*

Today, when Dan had asked the same question again, Adrienne had reassured him that she'd talk to Amanda. Though Dan had been skeptical—hadn't they tried that all along?—tonight, she knew, would be different.

Adrienne had few illusions about what her children thought of her. Yes, they loved her and respected her as a mother, but she knew they would never really *know* her. In the eyes of her children, she was kind but predictable, sweet and stable, a friendly soul from another era who'd made her way through life with her naive view of the world intact.

She looked the part, of course—veins beginning to show on the tops of her hands, a figure more like a square than an hourglass, and glasses grown thicker over the years—but when she saw them staring at her with expressions meant to humor her, she sometimes had to stifle a laugh.

Part of their error, she knew, stemmed from their desire to see her in a certain way, a preformed image they found acceptable for a woman her age. It was easier—and frankly, more comfortable—to think their mom was more sedate than daring, more of a plodder than someone with experiences that would surprise them. And in keeping with the kind, predictable, sweet, and stable mother that she was, she'd had no desire to change their minds.

Knowing that Amanda would be arriving any minute, Adrienne went to the refrigerator and set a bottle of pinot grigio on the table. The house had cooled since the afternoon, so she turned up the thermostat on her way to the bedroom.

Once the room she'd shared with Jack, it was hers now, redecorated twice since the divorce. Adrienne made her way to the four-poster bed she'd wanted ever since she was young. Wedged against the wall beneath the bed was a small stationery box, and Adrienne set it on the pillow beside her.

Inside were those things she had saved: the note he'd left at the Inn, a snapshot of him that had been taken at the clinic, and the letter she'd received a few weeks before Christmas. Beneath those items

were two bundled stacks, missives written between them, that sandwiched a conch they'd once found at the beach.

Adrienne set the note off to the side and pulled an envelope from one of the stacks, remembering how she'd felt when she'd first read it, then slid out the page. It had thinned and brittle, and though the ink had faded in the years since he'd first written it, his words were still clear.

Dear Adrienne,

I've never been good at writing letters, so I hope you'll forgive me if I'm not able to make myself clear.

I arrived this morning on a donkey, believe it or not, and found out where I'd be spending my days for a while. I wish I could tell you that it was better than I imagined it would be, but in all honesty, I can't. The clinic is short of just about everything—medicine, equipment, and the necessary beds—but I spoke to the director and I think I'll be able to rectify at least part of the problem. Though they have a generator to provide electricity, there aren't any phones, so I won't be able to call until I head into Esmeraldas. It's a couple of days' ride from here, and the next supply run isn't for a few weeks. I'm sorry about that, but I think we both suspected it might be this way.

I haven't seen Mark yet. He's been at an outreach clinic in the mountains and won't be back until later

this evening. I'll let you know how that goes, but I'm not expecting much at first. Like you said, I think we need to spend some time getting to know each other before we can work on the problems between us.

I can't even begin to count how many patients I saw today. Over a hundred, I'd guess. It's been a long time since I've seen patients in this way with these types of problems, but the nurse was helpful, even when I seemed lost. I think she was thankful that I was there at all.

I've been thinking about you constantly since I left, wondering why the journey I'm on seemed to have led through you. I know my journey's not over yet, and that life is a winding path, but I can only hope it somehow circles back to the place I belong.

That's how I think of it now. I belong with you. While I was driving, and again when the plane was in the air, I imagined that when I arrived in Quito, I'd see you in the crowds waiting for me. I knew that would be impossible, but for some reason, it made leaving you just a little easier. It was almost as if part of you had come with me.

I want to believe that's true. No, change that—I know it's true. Before we met, I was as lost as a person could be, and yet you saw something in me that somehow gave me direction again. We both know the reason I went to Rodanthe, but I can't stop thinking that greater forces were at work. I went there to close a chapter in my life, hoping it would help me find my way. But it was you, I

think, that I had been looking for all along. And it's you who is with me now.

We both know I have to be here for a while. I'm not sure when I'll be back, and even though it hasn't been long, I realize that I miss you more than I've ever missed anyone. Part of me yearns to jump on a plane and come to see you now, but if this is as real as I think it is, I'm sure we can make it. And I will be back, I promise you. In the short time we spent together, we had what most people can only dream about, and I'm counting the days until I can see you again. Never forget how much I love you.

Paul

When she finished reading, Adrienne set aside the letter and reached for the conch they'd stumbled across on a long-ago Sunday afternoon. Even now it smelled of brine, of timelessness, of the primordial scent of life itself. It was medium sized, perfectly formed, and without cracks, something nearly impossible to find in the rough surf of the Outer Banks after a storm. An omen, she'd thought then, and she remembered lifting it to her ear and saying that she could hear the sound of the ocean. At that, Paul had laughed, explaining that it *was* the ocean she was hearing. He'd put his arms around her then and whispered: "It's high tide, or didn't you notice?"

Adrienne thumbed through the other contents, removing what she needed for her talk with Amanda, wishing she had more time with the rest of

it. Maybe later, she thought. She slid the remaining items into the bottom drawer, knowing there was no need for Amanda to see those things. Grabbing the box, Adrienne stood from the bed and smoothed her skirt.

Her daughter would be arriving shortly.

Two



Adrienne was in the kitchen when she heard the front door open and close; a moment later, Amanda was moving through the living room.

“Mom?”

Adrienne set the box on the kitchen counter. “In here,” she called.

When Amanda pushed through the swinging doors into the kitchen, she found her mother sitting at the table, an unopened bottle of wine before her.

“What’s going on?” Amanda asked.

Adrienne smiled, thinking how pretty her daughter was. With light brown hair and hazel eyes to offset her high cheekbones, she had always been lovely. Though an inch shorter than Adrienne, she carried herself with the posture of a dancer and seemed taller. She was thin, too, a little too thin in Adri-

enne's opinion, but Adrienne had learned not to comment on it.

"I wanted to talk to you," Adrienne said.

"About what?"

Instead of answering, Adrienne motioned to the table. "I think you should sit down."

Amanda joined her at the table. Up close, Amanda looked drawn, and Adrienne reached for her hand. She squeezed it, saying nothing, then reluctantly let go as she turned toward the window. For a long moment, there were no sounds in the kitchen.

"Mom?" Amanda finally asked. "Are you okay?"

Adrienne closed her eyes and nodded. "I'm fine. I was just wondering where to begin."

Amanda stiffened slightly. "Is this about me again? Because if it is—"

Adrienne cut her off with a shake of her head. "No, this is about me," she said. "I'm going to tell you about something that happened fourteen years ago."

Amanda tilted her head, and in the familiar surroundings of the small kitchen, Adrienne began her story.