CHAPTER 1

The Bell Over the Door

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The chart on Rachel’s workbench was two hundred and thirty years old and had been rained on, sat on, and, at some point, used to wrap a fish. She loved it with the helpless affection other people reserved for stray dogs.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she told it. “You were the one who got wet.”

It was the second Tuesday in October, a little after four in the afternoon, and the light through the shop windows had gone the colour of weak tea. Winslow & Daughter, Framing and Restoration, occupied the ground floor of a narrow grey building on Anchor Street, between a chandlery that had not sold a chandelier in living memory and Pell’s Bakery and Tea, which sold things people actually wanted. Rachel’s flat was upstairs. Her mother’s counter was in front. The workbench stood in the back, under a skylight, where the good light fell and the customers could not see her talking to paper.

The chart was a coastal survey of the Penobscot approaches, drawn in 1794 by a man who had signed himself only *J. Hale, Surveyor*, and who had a lovely, nervous hand. The lower right corner was missing. Rachel had spent three days with a bone folder, wheat paste, and a pot of tea going cold at her elbow, and she was beginning to suspect that J. Hale had left the corner off on purpose. Some of the old surveyors did. They put in the parts they were sure of and left a blank where they weren’t, and the blank was the most honest thing on the sheet.

She tilted her head. The chart’s border was a degree off true.

She straightened it. Then she straightened the framed print on the wall behind her, which was also crooked, and the one above that. She had been told by several people that this was a habit. Rachel considered it a form of manners.

Longitude, the shop cat, watched from the top of the plan chest with one ear forward and the stump of the other one turned out of principle. He had arrived four winters ago with half an ear missing and a reputation for fighting, and had spent every day since lying in the sun like a retired bank manager.

“Judge me when you’ve fixed a corner,” Rachel told him.

The telephone on the counter rang. She heard her mother pick it up in the front, because Margaret Winslow answered a phone the way other people stepped onto a train, with a quick certainty that nothing could go wrong if she moved first. A murmur. A pause. “Yes, she’s here. Hold on.”

Margaret came to the doorway of the workroom, still holding the receiver against her cardigan. She was sixty-one, small and straight and silver-haired, and every line of her face had been ironed into place. “It’s Julian. He says the florist wants to know about the chrysanthemums.”

“What about them?”

“Whether you want them or whether you’ve been replaced by a person with taste.”

“I like chrysanthemums.”

“Nobody likes chrysanthemums, Rachel. They’re what you buy when you’re afraid of a flower.” Margaret held out the phone. “Tell him yes. I’ll look after the rest.”

Rachel took the phone. “I like chrysanthemums.”

“I know,” said Julian, with the warmth in his voice that had made her trust him from the first week. “I’ve told her that. She’s holding the

line for the freesias. I'm only calling because the florist said she needs an answer by Friday, and I promised I'd stop being a coward about it."

"We'll tell her yes to both."

"A compromise. You're going to make a wonderful diplomat's wife." He paused, and she heard a pencil being put down, a small clean sound. Julian Merrick was an architect, and he did everything as if somebody might later want to measure it. "Are you all right? You sound as if you're thinking about something."

"I'm thinking about a corner."

"Ah. The fish chart."

"It isn't a fish chart."

"It was wrapped around a fish."

"For one afternoon in 1850. It has a life beyond that."

He laughed. It was a good laugh, low and unhurried, and she stood in the quiet of her own workroom with the phone against her ear and felt, as she often did, that she had been lucky. Julian was thirty-six and kind and funny in a way that arrived slowly, like a tide. He had walked into the shop last winter carrying a rolled-up property survey of his grandfather's, which had been used as a tablecloth at a wedding, and she had fixed it in a week. He had asked her to dinner on the day he collected it. He had proposed in February, standing on the half-finished staircase of the Lamplighter Inn, which he was restoring, holding a ring in one hand and a steel tape measure in the other because he had forgotten to put it down.

She had said yes. She had meant it. She still did.

"I'll see you at seven," he said. "I'm bringing the seating chart. Prepare yourself. Your Aunt Dot and my cousin Gavin cannot be placed within sight of each other, and I've run out of room."

"Put them at the kids' table."

"Rachel."

“They’d be happy there. They’d have crayons.”

When she hung up, Margaret was still in the doorway, watching her with that look, the one that was not disapproval and never approval either. It was the look of a woman examining a pane of glass for flaws.

“He’s a good man,” her mother said.

“I know he is.”

“A steady one.”

“I know, Mom.”

“I only say it because steadiness is rarer than people think.” Margaret turned back toward the counter. At the threshold she stopped, her hand on the frame, and said without looking round, “I was at the post office this morning. Dale Pruitt says there’s a car at the old Alder cottage. The one that’s let out. Somebody came in on the evening bus and he didn’t leave a name.”

“Tern Cottage? Mrs. Alder hasn’t had a tenant in two years.”

“That’s what I said.” Margaret’s voice was perfectly even. “I thought you ought to know.”

She went out. The bell above the shop door, a small brass ship’s bell on a spring that Rachel’s father had mounted when she was a child, rang once as the front door opened and closed on a customer. Rachel heard a man’s voice ask about a poster frame and her mother’s voice answer. It was an ordinary afternoon.

She went back to her chart and picked up the bone folder, and for no reason at all her hand began to shake.

It was a small shake. She put the tool down and looked at her fingers. They had never done that before. They were the steadiest hands in Marlowe Bay, steady enough to float a torn corner onto a ground of Japanese tissue without a ripple, and now they trembled like a leaf on a windowpane, and she did not know why.

Somebody came in on the evening bus.

She told herself it was nothing. She told herself that nobody comes back from a place like that without telling anyone, that nobody gets on a bus in the dark and lets a harbour policeman find out first. She told herself that she had a seating chart to look at and a florist to call and a wedding in less than four weeks.

At ten to five she locked the back door and turned the sign in the window, which her mother liked to leave on OPEN until the last possible minute and which Rachel always changed early. She stood for a moment with her hand on the glass, looking down Anchor Street toward the harbour. The sun was nearly gone. The boats had come in. Pell's lights were on, yellow and welcoming, and she could see Nora inside wiping the counter with the vigour of a woman who has been told her cake is overpriced.

It was only when she turned to fetch her coat that she noticed the silence.

The shop was quiet in a way it had not been a moment before. Her mother had gone into the back to put the kettle on. Longitude had stopped washing. The street outside held its breath.

The bell over the door rang.

It rang the way it always rang, a single small note, and Rachel said without turning, "We're closed, I'm sorry, come back in the morning."

Nobody answered.

She turned.