CHAPTER ONE

The Quiet House

The kettle clicked off, and nobody said, “That’ll be the tea, then.”

For forty-one years somebody always had. Tom said it every morning in a voice he believed was funny, a pencil behind his ear and sawdust on his socks, and Eleanor answered with the look she had been giving him since the week they married. That was her half of the joke. Now the kettle clicked, and the kitchen at 14 Cooper’s Lane held the sound a moment, the way a church holds a cough, and then let it go.

She took down one cup. She had mostly stopped taking down two.

It had been fourteen months. Eleanor knew the number the way she had once known the Dewey decimal system, without effort and with no way to switch it off. She had spent thirty-one years as the librarian at Linden Bay Elementary, and her mind still shelved things whether she asked it to or not. Grief, for instance, lived at 155.937, in the psychology section, a few shelves from the books on how to be happy. She had looked it up once, on purpose. It had not been a comfort. It had only been accurate.

The morning went the way mornings went now. Toast. The crossword, which she finished faster than she used to, since nobody leaned over her shoulder to say “seven across is obviously a fish.” A phone call to Connie that lasted nine minutes and covered Connie’s

hip, Connie's neighbour's dog, and Connie's opinion of the new bypass. Then a walk down the garden.

She never walked all of it. The garden at Cooper's Lane ran long and narrow, past the vegetable beds and Tom's lilacs, to a green door set into the wall of the old garage. Behind the green door was Tom's workshop. It smelled of cedar and linseed oil. His pencils stood in a coffee tin, sharpened, because the last thing he had done in there was sharpen them. His apron hung on its nail. Eleanor had not opened that door since the week of the funeral, and she knew the exact count of the days, which was one of the more humiliating things about being a librarian.

She stopped at the lilacs every time. She put a hand on the nearest branch, like someone feeling a forehead for fever, and then she walked back up to the house. It was a small routine. She had decided it was not a sad one. She had decided a number of things like that.

At ten o'clock the front door banged, which meant Maisie.

"Gran! I come bearing carbohydrates."

Maisie Hale was twenty-two and moved through rooms as if they had been arranged to her inconvenience. She had her mother's dark hair and her grandfather's habit of talking while doing three other things. Today she was carrying a white paper bag from Pomeroy's Bakery in one hand and a sheet of yellow paper in the other, and she was trying to kick off her boots without using either.

"You'll fall," said Eleanor.

"I've never fallen in my life." Maisie fell against the doorframe, recovered, and held up the bag. "Cinnamon twists. Mrs. Pomeroy says hello and also that you owe her a book."

"I owe her a book from 1996."

"She says it's gaining interest."

They sat at the kitchen table. Maisie ate a twist in four bites and put the yellow sheet on the table between them, face up, smoothing it flat with the side of her hand, as though it might otherwise run away.

THE LINDEN BAY PLAYERS, it said across the top, in a font that had clearly been chosen by someone's nephew. *Open auditions for our autumn production: MOONLIGHT ON MARIGOLD LANE, a romantic comedy in three acts. Tuesday, 7 p.m., Harbour Street Playhouse. All ages welcome. No experience necessary. Bring a pencil.*

Eleanor read it the whole way through, including the part at the bottom about parking. Then she slid it back across the table with one finger.

"No."

"I haven't asked anything."

"You've brought a flyer to my kitchen. That is a question in the shape of a piece of paper."

"Gran." Maisie leaned in. She had stage-managed in university and had picked up there a way of lowering her voice that made people lean in as well. "There's a part in it. Odette Marlowe. She's sixty-eight, she's a widow, she runs a boarding house by the sea, and she keeps a lamp lit in the front window every night."

"For whom?"

"For nobody. That's the whole joke. Then somebody turns up."

"I am seventy years old."

"Odette is sixty-eight. I checked."

“I have not been on a stage since I was sixteen.”

“Odette doesn’t do stunts. She does tea and sarcasm. You do tea and sarcasm every day of your life.” Maisie grinned and then, to her credit, stopped grinning. “Gran, you don’t have to get it. You don’t have to want it. Just come on Tuesday and sit in the back and eat the terrible cookies Dolly brings. It’ll be two hours. You’ll have been out of the house.”

“I go out of the house.”

“You go to the end of the garden and back.”

That landed, and they both knew it had, and for a moment the kitchen was very quiet. The refrigerator hummed. A branch scraped the window.

Eleanor folded her hands. “Who told you that?”

“Nobody told me. I have eyes. I watch you from the upstairs window when I’m here.” Maisie turned the sheet around again, though there was nothing new on it. “And Grandpa told me one thing. The last week, in the hospital, when he was mostly asleep. He said it twice. I wasn’t going to say it, because it sounds like a trick, and it isn’t one. He said, *Your grandmother used to sing. Make her sing.*”

Eleanor did not move. Years of standing in front of thirty restless eight-year-olds had taught her not to flinch when something landed, and it served her now. She kept her hands folded, her face still, and her eyes on the cinnamon twist she had not touched.

Tom had never said such a thing to her. Not once in forty-one years. When they first talked properly, when she was twenty-three and he was a quiet carpenter who had come to mend the library’s staircase, she had sung in the car once, at a red light, and he had

looked straight ahead and said nothing at all, which she had taken for a verdict. She had not sung in the car again. She had not sung anywhere, except in church, in the safe middle of the congregation, where a voice could hide among other voices like a pea in a bowl of peas.

She had sung once, properly, at sixteen. It had been a school musical in a cold gymnasium, and she had been a girl in a green dress with a solo and a very bad case of nerves, and afterward a boy had been waiting by the stage door with his hands in his pockets.

She put that away at once. It was a habit. It went in the drawer where the old things went.

“He was on a great deal of medication,” she said.

“He was,” said Maisie. “He was also Grandpa. He didn’t say things by accident. He once spent a week deciding which screw to use for a bookshelf.”

“That is true.”

“Come Tuesday.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“That’s what you said about getting a cell phone.”

“And I got one.”

“Four years later.”

Eleanor smiled, because there was no avoiding it. Maisie took that for surrender, which it was not.