Chapter 1: Cream and Black

On Alder Lane, Monday mornings smelled like Daniel’s bread.

He baked on Sundays, but the smell lingered into the week, soaked into the kitchen curtains and the good dish towels, and Claire Whitmore had long ago stopped trying to explain to people why she loved it. It was not the bread. It was the proof that nothing in her house was in a hurry.

“You’re doing it again,” Daniel said.

“Doing what?”

“Straightening the salt.” He did not look up from the paper. He was forty-one, broad through the shoulders, with sawdust that never quite left the creases of his knuckles, and he read the local news the way other men read scripture, slowly and with occasional disbelief. “You only touch the salt when you’re worried.”

“I’m not worried. I’m organized.”

“You’re a defense attorney with a murder trial in two weeks. You’re allowed both.”

She moved the salt an inch to the left, then back, and he smiled into his coffee. That was the thing about a good marriage. Nobody had to pretend they hadn’t noticed.

The house was the quietest on the quietest street in Larkspur, a river town of twenty-eight thousand people where the most dramatic weekly event was usually the zoning board. Their neighbors on the left were retired schoolteachers who waved from their porch. On the right was a couple with a very old beagle that sang at the mailman.

Everything on Alder Lane had been built before 1940 and was being gently restored by someone who loved it. Daniel's own house was the proof. He had spent three years putting back the original window sashes, one rope and weight at a time, and when he finished, the old glass had rippled the morning light across the floor like water.

Claire was thirty-nine. She had a law practice with her name on the door, a husband who made her laugh at six in the morning, and a green Volvo wagon with a hundred and forty thousand miles on it and no intention of dying. If someone had asked her that Monday, she would have said she was lucky. She would have knocked on the table when she said it, the way her mother used to.

At seven-forty, the mail came through the slot in the front door and landed on the hall floor with the flat slap of a card dealt face down.

"I'll get it," she said.

There was a gas bill. There was a flyer for a chimney sweep. There was a postcard from Daniel's sister in Maine with a picture of a lighthouse that looked like every other lighthouse. And under them, thicker than the rest and the color of good butter, there was an envelope that was not like the others.

It was heavy paper. She could tell before she turned it over, from the way it resisted her thumb. Her name was written across the front in green-black ink, in a sloping hand with long, confident tails on the letters. Claire Whitmore, 14 Alder Lane, Larkspur. No return address. A stamp, a postmark she did not read. And on the flap, a seal of black wax, pressed with a small round design she did not recognize: a letter P inside a wreath of leaves.

She stood in the hall for a moment with the other mail pinched against her hip. Wax seals belonged to weddings and costume

dramas. In her whole life she had received exactly one, from a law school friend who had gotten very into calligraphy and moved to Vermont.

“Anything good?” Daniel called.

“Gas bill,” she said. “And a lighthouse.”

She put the flyer and the bill on the hall table, carried the postcard into the kitchen for him, and said she needed to find her other shoe. Then she went upstairs, into the small room at the back that served as her study, and shut the door.

Her father’s rolltop desk stood under the window. It had belonged to Walter Hale for thirty years and to Claire for twenty, and Daniel had refinished it last spring as a birthday present, stripping the old varnish down to the honey-colored oak. She sat in the chair that still smelled faintly of her father’s pipe, which could not be possible after twenty years, and slid a letter opener under the flap.

The wax cracked cleanly, with a small dry sound like a knuckle.

Inside was a single sheet, folded in thirds. She held it up to the window out of habit, the way she held every document, and saw that the paper carried a watermark, a faint pale P inside a leaf. Then she lowered it and read the one line written there, in the same green-black ink.

Eleven years ago this month, at 4:52 on a Thursday afternoon, you signed Dorothy Pell’s statement into the file and wrote “Not for disclosure” across the top.

That was all. No signature, no greeting, no demand.

Claire read it once, and then she read it again, and the second time the words did not change, which was the first thing that frightened

her. She had spent most of her adult life watching witnesses and clients try to make sentences mean something else. She knew what it looked like when a sentence refused.

She put the letter flat on the desk and kept her hand on it, as if it might lift off.

Downstairs, the radio went on. A man's voice read the weather. Her husband started whistling something tuneless, which meant he was making the second pot of coffee. All of it came up through the floorboards as faint as a broadcast from another country.

Dorothy Pell.

She had not heard the name aloud in eleven years. She had not written it, or typed it, or let it sit for more than a few seconds in her own head, and the effort of that had become so automatic that she no longer noticed she was doing it. Now it was on the page, in a stranger's perfect handwriting, with the date and the hour and the three words she had written herself with a blue felt-tip pen, because it was the first pen she had grabbed.

Not for disclosure.

* * *

Eleven years ago, Claire had been twenty-eight years old and an assistant district attorney in Harrow County, and she had believed, completely and without irony, that the law was a machine for finding the truth and that she was one of the people who kept it running.

She had been second chair in State v. Calvin Teague. A nineteen-year-old girl named Lena Ward had been found in the millrace behind the old grain mill, and a twenty-two-year-old handyman with a record for petty theft and a bad temper had been

charged with her murder. The first chair was Harlan Vance, the district attorney himself, who was then sixty-six and had been elected five times and could make a jury lean toward him like plants toward a window. He would finish his career on the bench, and the whole town would call him the judge for the rest of his life.

On the Thursday before closing arguments, a manila envelope had been delivered to Harlan's office. It contained a typed statement from a woman named Dorothy Pell, who worked nights at a laundromat on River Street. Mrs. Pell said that on the night Lena Ward died, Calvin Teague had been in her laundromat from shortly after midnight until well past three, folding the same load of towels three times because he had nowhere to go.

Lena Ward had died, according to the medical examiner, at about two in the morning.

Harlan had read the statement standing at the window with his glasses pushed up on his forehead. Then he handed it to Claire and said, "Log it and leave it."

She had said, "Harlan, if this is true…"

"A woman who cleans other people's socks for a living, who comes forward the week before trial. Who's she protecting? A drunk, a lonely heart, a friend of the family. Log it and leave it, Claire. Put it in the file. We'll deal with it if we have to."

She was twenty-eight. She loved him the way you love someone who has chosen you out of a room full of candidates. So she took the pages to her own desk and logged them in, at 4:52 by the clock over the filing cabinet. Then she took the blue pen and wrote the three words across the top of the first page. She did not think of them as a lie. She thought of them as a delay.