CHAPTER 1

The Invitation

The envelope was the color of good butter, and it did not belong in Emma Whitfield’s mailbox.

She noticed that first, before she noticed her name. Everything else in the box that Thursday was the usual September harvest: a gas bill, a flyer for a roofing company that promised to “love your leaks,” and a catalog for a store that believed she wanted a wooden spoon the size of an oar. The cream envelope sat among them like a cat that had wandered into a bus station.

She read it on the stairs, because she always took the stairs. Her apartment was on the third floor of a brick building in Logan Square, and she had never once used the elevator in eight years. The building’s other tenants thought this was a fitness habit. It was not. Emma disliked any room that could stop between floors and make her wait for somebody else’s decision.

The card inside was thick and stiff. It was addressed to *Ms. Emma Whitfield* in handwriting that looked like a person had done it, though the spacing was too perfect to be sure.

> *Solenne Private Introductions is pleased to invite you to a confidential conversation. We believe we may be able to help you find someone worth finding. There is no*

obligation, and there is no fee for the first evening. Thursday, September eleventh, seven o’clock. The Aldous Pumping House, River Street.

Underneath, in smaller type: *Please bring no one. We will know why.*

Emma read this twice. Then she read the last line a third time, because it was either charming or sinister and she wanted to catch the moment it picked.

It did not pick.

“Absolutely not,” she told the stairwell.

The stairwell, which had heard her say worse, did not reply.

* * *

The next morning she carried the card into the office and put it on Nora Brennan’s desk like an exhibit in a trial.

Hargrove & Lind occupied two floors of a converted printing house near the river. It smelled of coffee, foam board and the faint warm dust of plotters running. Emma had worked there for nine years. She was good at her job in the specific way that makes other architects slightly annoyed: she could look at a drawing and tell you where the building was lying.

Nora read the card. She was thirty-six, loud in a way that made rooms friendlier, and she had a laugh that could be heard

through two sets of glass doors. She was also the only person in the building who had ever seen Emma cry, a fact they both pretended had been settled by a statute of limitations.

“Solenne,” said Nora. She said it the way people say the name of a restaurant they have been trying to get into for a year. “Em. Do you know who gets one of these?”

“I’m guessing someone who owns a yacht.”

“My cousin Dana got one. Dana’s husband is an actual husband. They’ve been together four years and they finish each other’s sentences, which is horrible, but it’s also real. She says they matched her in six weeks.”

“Dana has a gift for exaggeration.”

“Dana has a gift for *marriage*.” Nora held the card up to the window light as if it might have a watermark that read *Say yes*. “It says there’s no fee. What’s the worst thing that happens? You sit in a nice room and somebody asks you what kind of man you want. You’ll lie, they’ll notice, you’ll have a glass of wine. You haven’t been to a nice room since the spring.”

“I went to the funeral home.”

“That wasn’t a nice room, that was a room that charged you for flowers.” Nora’s voice went softer, though not by much. “It’s been seven months, Em. Your dad would have wanted you to be happy.”

“My father would have wanted me to be *sound*,” said Emma. “He thought happiness was a kind of finish. You put it on at the end, if the structure was good.”

“That’s a terrible philosophy.”

“It was reliable.”

Nora put the card down and looked at her. It was a look Emma had learned to dread, because it came with a question already loaded.

“When did you last come home to a place that felt like someone was in it?”

Emma opened her mouth to say *Tuesday*, which would have been a lie, and found that she had no second lie ready.

She had a fear that she had never described to anyone, including Nora. It was a small, specific picture. She pictured herself coming home at night to a house with every light on and nobody in it. The lights were not there to welcome her. They were burning because somebody had forgotten to switch them off when they left.

Nora waited. Then she said, much more gently, “Go and look at the room. If it’s weird, you leave. You’re good at leaving.”

“I’m good at structural criticism.”

“Same thing. Go.”

* * *

The Aldous Pumping House stood at the bend of the river, a long, brick, high-shouldered building from the 1890s that had once lifted water for half the city and now lifted nothing. Emma had passed it for years without thinking about it. Today she looked at it the way she looked at everything, from the foundations up.

It had a good, plain face. Red brick, cream stone at the windows, a tall central hall with arched openings that had been filled in with glass. There was a scaffold on the eastern end, a gray lattice of poles and netting, and a banner on the fence read RESTORATION IN PROGRESS: HARGROVE & LIND ARCHITECTS.

She stopped and stared at it.

Her own firm’s name was on the fence.

She had worked on that east wing for three weeks. She had measured its cracked cornice and argued with a masonry supplier about lime mortar. She had known that the building belonged to a holding company with a name like a sleeping pill, Ardent Holdings, and that the tenant would be “a private members’ organization.” No one had told her what kind. People in her business rarely asked, because the answer was usually a golf club.

“Small world,” Emma said, to nobody.