

INHERITANCE

chapter one

Nadine Gayle wasn't sure she knew where she was going.

Only that it wasn't back.

She hadn't been this way since they'd put in the new bypass. The road winding behind her was empty and still and her pale gray eyes flicked to the rearview as she wondered if the house would feel the same. Empty and still. And alone like she did.

She clicked off the AC in the old Ford hatchback and rolled down her window. The air was redolent with rain on fresh blacktop and wisps of her long brown hair came untethered from an updo. It was warm for late fall in Southern Indiana.

When at last she turned onto Cedar Hollow Lane, the sun was full on the horizon. A crow lifted from a fencepost and vanished into the trees.

At the far end of the street, tucked beneath a canopy of leaves and the lace of flashing shadow, was the house. It looked smaller than she remembered. But maybe that was because of the trees. Or the distance. Or time.

She'd only been a child when she'd been here last and the memories that lingered were half-faded snapshots with no captions or context. The warmth of a hand on hers, the smell of baking apples, the grown-up voices that went silent when she came in a room.

Now, those memories were as much her inheritance as the

house itself. Her grandmother's lawyer, apologetic and vague, had reached out only a few weeks before to deliver the news. *"I've taken care of all the paperwork on my end,"* he'd assured her. And so the house was passed down with no real explanation, just her name on the deed and a ring of keys courtesy of FedEx Express.

Tires crunching gravel, she pulled into the drive and cut the engine. Then for a moment, hands resting on the wheel as the light grew thick, Nadine took in the shape of what would hold her future.

Three steep gables rose over a wraparound porch trimmed in delicate, aging fretwork. The white paint was neither fresh nor fading, though the trim was weathered around the arched windows on the second floor. Trailing vines of ivy crept up one side, curling toward the eaves with stubborn resolve. One shutter near the front door hung just a little off kilter.

It was charming, she thought, and she stepped out to face the house that now belonged to her.

Or maybe, it was more what her mother believed. Maybe it was Nadine who now belonged to the house. She knew Margot wouldn't be happy about her daughter moving to Cedar Hollow Lane, but she hadn't expected just how unhappy she'd be.

"You shouldn't go back there, Nadine. You don't understand what you're accepting."

"It's just a house, mother," Nadine had said, bristling at Margot's concern. *"I need the money and someplace to live. You know that. I'm not exactly flush with options right now."*

"If it's about money, you know I'll help you."

"Mom. I'm a grown woman. I should be able to take care of myself and if that means I accept the inheritance, then—"

"You could sell the house, Nadine. Living there is ... It's an obligation."

“An obligation? To accept our family? You’re the one who didn’t want that obligation. Don’t put that on me.”

At that, Margot had exhaled deeply over the transatlantic line. “*Nadine, honey. You don’t understand. It’s ...*”

“It’s what? A ghost story? A curse?”

“Just promise me you’ll be careful. There’s so much sorrow there and right now, you’re—”

“Broke? Unable to renew my lease? Replaced by robots?”

Nadine had stared at the half-packed boxes littering what used to be her cute little living room in her cute little apartment in the big busy city where she’d allowed herself to dream and huffed into the phone. *“I mean. Take your pick, mom.”*

“Promise me, honey. That if you feel like you’re losing yourself, you’ll leave. Do you hear me? You’ll leave it behind.”

Nadine had laughed, though it had come out thinner than she’d meant. *“Sure, Mom. If the wallpaper starts whispering, I’ll book a ticket to Brittany.”*

“Okay, honey. I just ... Okay.”

And that had been that.

But now her mother’s words lingered, caught somewhere between unspilled tears and the door ahead.

As she stepped over the threshold to the cool air inside, the emptiness surged forward to meet her. She felt like a pebble tossed in a lake with no ripple left behind. Then she let go of the breath she didn’t know she’d been holding and closed the front door behind her.

The foyer was bathed in amber twilight sifted through gauze sheers, blurring the corners of the ceiling to shadow. Wood floors with narrow planks stretched beneath her feet, scratched in places but still

sturdy, and the walls were painted a faded cream with wainscoting the color of tea left too long to steep. Stacks of boxes, their white shipping labels still affixed with clear tape, were neatly arranged along the walls. She'd packed and sent them ahead last week using preprinted forms from her grandmother's lawyer.

The quiet was almost absolute. No neighbor's TV, no distant traffic. Just the tap from the chain of the ceiling fan and the faint creak of floorboards as she moved. Back in the city, her footsteps were lost in the clatter of elevator cables and midnight sirens. Here, they almost echoed.

Above a narrow entry table hung an antique mirror with a gilt frame and a single crack feathering from one edge. Her reflection looked oddly suspended as she set her keys on the table and trailed her fingers across its surface. Dust clung to her skin.

"Well," Nadine said to the empty room. "Here I am." She shifted her weight, wiped her hands on her jeans, and hooked her thumbs into her pockets. "Let's see what you have to show me."

She moved first to the formal dining room where a hutch stood like a shrine, its glass doors clouded with age. Inside, stemware and delicately patterned dishes meant for special occasions were arranged in rigid rows.

The table was set for four. Napkins folded under tarnished silver, a single chair pulled out slightly from the rest. Nadine ran her finger lightly along the edge of a saucer. It wobbled, then stilled.

In the parlor, the furniture had been draped in linen that dulled the outlines of wingback chairs and an old tufted settee. Dust whirled in the air as she pulled one sheet corner free, revealing floral upholstery worn smooth at the arms. On a side table, there still sat a tea cup, pale porcelain rimmed in gold.

The place felt staged, she thought. Like someone had left for a

quick errand and always meant to come back.

She stepped back into the hallway and moved on.

The kitchen was more modern with mid-century upgrades. Pale blue formica countertops stretched beneath white, glass-knobbed cabinets and a wide ceramic sink. A recipe clipped from the *Eldeburg Herald* in July 1997 was still on the fridge, held in place by a magnet shaped like a cat wearing a chef's hat. The floor was goldenrod tile linoleum, worn but clean save for a pair of boot prints by the back door, the only evidence, Nadine thought, the movers had left behind.

A ticking sound, faint but insistent, broke the silence. Nadine turned from a cabinet, its shelves lined with old wallpaper under neatly stacked plates, to find a decorative clock perched on the wall. Its face was cheerful and a little smug, painted with dancing vegetables and a tiny smiling sun.

The minute hand jerked forward with a soft click and landed squarely at 2:23.

Then stopped.

Nadine pulled her phone from her back pocket, the screen bright in the dusk-lit room. 8:03 p.m.

“I guess we need batteries, sunshine,” she said to the clock. And she stepped back into the hall, her heart beating faster with no reason she was able, or willing, to name.

Beneath the back stairs, a built-in bench sat nestled between the angled wall and cubby shelves with forgotten odds and ends: old newspapers and magazines with the corners curled in, empty glass jars, and a chipped mug with THE SPIRIT OF '76 in faded script.

Nadine sat on the bench and reached for the mug. The ceramic was cool and smudged with dirt. Her thumb traced the nick along the rim as a memory surfaced. Her grandmother's hands, strong and soft, lifting that same mug off the kitchen table. Steam rising from it. Apple

peelings in a bowl. Pies in the oven for Sunday supper.

It ached to remember.

She set the mug down gently as if it might shatter under the weight of her thoughts, and almost in answer, came the sound of shifting floorboards on the second floor above her head.

Nadine jumped just a bit, then forced herself to steady. Old houses made noise. Settling beams, shifting air, loose joints. That's all it was.

Still, as she moved up the stairs, she found herself stepping a little more quietly than before. At the top, she moved slowly, letting her gaze linger as she passed—faded damask wallpaper, dark six-panel doors with brass knobs, a scattering of old watermarks on the ceiling.

She stopped at the room where she'd always stayed on visits and nudged open the door. Inside, the bed was already made. Crisp white sheets folded down over a quilt pulled taut with fresh, plump pillows. The curtains at the window were tied neatly back and two tall wardrobe boxes stood in the corner. She didn't remember asking the movers to place them there. But there they waited.

Nadine stepped closer to the bed and ran her hand along the edge of one ruffled pillowcase—cool, soft cotton beneath her fingers. She gave a faint, bemused laugh. She certainly hadn't requested turn-down service.

Maybe someone at the firm had taken the initiative. She made a mental note to thank Charles Everly the next time she heard from him and sat slowly on the edge of the mattress. She looked around the room, her eyes drawn to the shadowed corners.

It felt as though the silence here had shape. Presence.

She told herself it was nothing as she kicked off her boots and lay back against the pillows.

And then, for good measure, she told herself again.

First Light

chapter two

The morning light on Cedar Hollow Lane was filmy and fog clung to the curbs. Nadine stood on the porch steps with THE SPIRIT OF '76 mug that was now hers, blinking at the town she hadn't seen in years but had somehow never left behind.

She could taste wet leaves and motor oil in her coffee.

Giving a wave to the street cleaning crew, she set the mug aside and mentally sorted her to-do list. Most of it could wait. The utilities had already been transferred. The boxes would still be here to unpack later. The boot prints by the back door in the kitchen were gone, had only been a trick of the light, she thought, and that crooked shutter probably wouldn't be as easy to fix as it looked. Repairs on old houses never were.

Getting out of the house, she decided, was the best thing to do on her first day in it. While rummaging through the enclosed back porch, before the heavy machinery arrived down the road, she'd found boxes of old paperbacks just as WELD Channel 3, "Eldeburg's trusted source for news and sports," ran a piece about the local senior living center's request for books. She could pick up batteries for the kitchen clock while she was at it. And maybe get coffee someplace where they weren't cleaning the street.

Paperbacks stashed in her hatchback, Nadine set off to The Meadows of Eldeburg, a sprawling one-level red-brick building dotted with patios across from a parking lot that had once been a diner and

before that, maybe a gallows. An old plaque that read TOWN GREEN, 1799 marked the spot. No one ever mentioned the gallows, but everyone stared at that patch of grass a little too long.

When she arrived, the receptionist barely looked up as she pointed toward a large common room past the lobby. “Over on the cart, hon. They’ll go through ‘em.”

The room smelled like potpourri and furniture polish, intensified by a thermostat apparently set to “boil the elderly.” The walls were painted the color of ambivalent cheer: one gallon beige to three cups yellow. In the corner sat a group of women playing cards beneath a quilted banner: SILVER SPIRITS CLUB: AGE BEFORE BEAUTY, BUT WE’LL TAKE BOTH.

Nadine did not go unnoticed as she moved quietly toward the donation table.

“You’re a Gayle, aren’t you?”

The voice was warm, if not exactly friendly. Nadine turned to find a woman seated in an overstuffed chair with a crocheted blanket draped over her lap. She wore a long navy skirt, sensible shoes, and a patterned blouse that probably once had its own two-page spread in a 1980s Sears catalog.

“I am, yes.” Nadine was too surprised to lie and wouldn’t have known what to say if she did.

“I thought so. I knew your grandmother. Della Gayle. She used to bring us preserves in summer. Blackberry and elderflower.” The woman tilted her head. “Though she stopped coming after ...” Her fingers drummed lightly on the armrest. “Well. She just stopped coming.”

A few of the card players glanced over.

The woman extended her hand. “Barb Weaver. Historian emeritus here in Eldeburg, though it’s been some years since the title

meant anything. I also lead the Heritage Circle on Thursdays. You should join us.”

Nadine hesitated, then shook her hand. Barb’s grip was firm and dry and not at all frail.

“I’m just settling in,” she said.

“Settling into *that* house?”

Nadine tensed. “It’s always been in the family.”

“So it has been.”

Barb said nothing else for a long moment. Then, “Some stories settle in bones the way cold settles in wood. Hard to know if they’re still alive or just remembered.”

The lights buzzed faintly overhead as Nadine placed the old books on the table without responding.

“Well. If you’re ever curious about your people, I keep files,” Barb said. “Not the town’s version. The real one.”

Still unsure how to answer, Nadine ran her hand along the edge of the table, smoothing a wrinkle in the cloth. “That’s kind of you,” she finally managed.

“No, dear. It’s not kindness. It’s hunger.”

Hunger?

Barb let out a dry, amused chuckle that turned a few heads. “Oh, don’t look so rattled. I just mean that once you get a taste for history, you never can quite get your belly filled up. It’s always more questions, more layers, more dust in your soup.” She waved a hand, dismissing her own comment like smoke from a candle.

“Right. Well ... thank you. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“You should come some Thursday. People need stories that aren’t in textbooks. Especially the ones your family left behind.” Barb leaned forward just slightly. “You’re not the first Gayle to stir up the river, you know.”

Before Nadine could reply, the receptionist called out, “Hon, there’s donuts in the back if you want one. The maple ones are safe. Mostly.”

Barb settled back in her chair as laughter rose from the card table.

“Don’t eat anything Doris brings unless it’s wrapped in foil or still frozen,” scoffed a woman with a beehive hairdo and floral support stockings.

“You’re just jealous she can cook,” her partner replied. “That lemon cake last week was from scratch.”

“That lemon cake was from 1973.”

The ladies all laughed and Nadine waited by the table. “I should be going, but thank you. I hope you’ll like the books,” she said. “Still got boxes to unpack.”

“Of course.” Barb adjusted the blanket on her lap. “But if the house gives you trouble, you come find me. Some houses talk and some holler. Yours was always loud.”