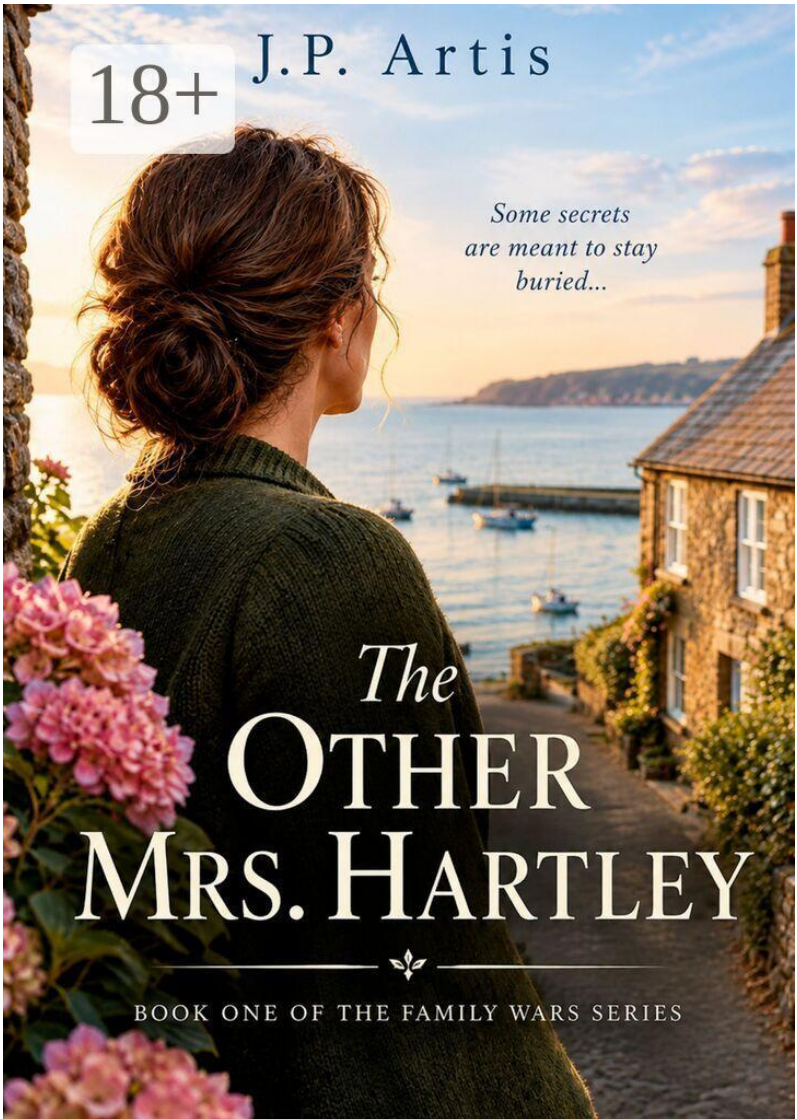
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J.P. Artis
Some secrets are meant to stay buried...
The Other Mrs. Hartley
BOOK ONE OF THE FAMILY WARS SERIES

J.P. Artis
The Other Mrs. Hartley

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Аннотация

When a blizzard traps Nora Whitlock, an American newlywed, and her hostile mother-in-law Margaret together, an unexpected birth forces them to rely on each other. With Daniel away in the army, the two women face debt, hardship and years of separation, bound by secrets, quarrels and reluctant loyalty. A lost recipe book and a fifty-year-old secret will test whether they can remain enemies or become family. A warm, witty and poignant story of pride, motherhood and the unexpected road to love.

Содержание

PART ONE: THE HOUSE ON CINDER LANE 5
Chapter One: The Name at the Table 5
Chapter Two: Six Months 11
Chapter Three: Mrs. Hartley's Rules 17
RULES OF THE HOUSE 17
Chapter Four: The Ledger 23
Chapter Five: Maggie McAllister 28
Chapter Six: What Daniel Doesn't Know 33
Chapter Seven: Bog Myrtle and Ink 39
Chapter Eight: The Night of the Snow 47
Chapter Nine: Possession 55
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 59

The Other Mrs. Hartley

J.P. Artis

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PART ONE: THE HOUSE ON CINDER LANE

The year Daniel was away

Chapter One: The Name at the Table

On the last Sunday of August, Margaret Hartley roasted a leg of lamb for a son who had not been home in four months, and she knew before the gravy was made that something was wrong.

It was in the way Daniel ate. He had always eaten like a boy who expected the plate to be taken away: fast, head down, one arm curled round the dish. Today he cut his lamb into small, careful squares and moved them around as if he were arranging evidence. He drank two glasses of water in a row. He looked at the clock, which hung over the dresser and had told the wrong time since 1997, and then at his mother, and then, with great interest, at the salt.

«Out with it,» said Margaret.

«Out with what?»

«Whatever you've been chewing on since the soup. You've been wearing that face since you were six years old. You wore it the day you broke Mrs. Pickering's greenhouse.»

«That was a cricket ball. It was an accident.»

«It was not a cricket ball, it was a *pebble,* and you were aiming at a gull. Out with it, Daniel.»

Her son put down his fork. He was thirty-two, tall and fair and slightly stooped, a man built for ducking under the low beams of Saltby cottages, with his father's long jaw and her own pale, watchful eyes. A good boy. A kind boy. A boy who had stayed at the smokehouse when every other lad in the village had left for Leeds or London, who had learned the brine and the oak-chips and the slow patient art of the kiln, and who had never once complained that the money was thin.

He had been in Boston for three weeks, representing Hartley & Sons at a seafood trade fair. Margaret had been against it from the start. *Boston,* she had said. *What do they know about kippers in Boston?* But the tickets had been cheap, and the fair had been free, and the bank had sent two letters in the post that spring that she had read standing at the sink, and then folded very small and put in the biscuit tin where Walter used to keep the spare keys.

«I met someone,» said Daniel.

The lamb on Margaret's fork stopped halfway to her mouth.

«Her name is Nora. Nora Whitlock. She's a book conservator. She works at a library, repairing old manuscripts. She was at the fair with a friend, and she came to the stall because she said the smell reminded her of her grandfather's kitchen.» He was talking faster now, the words tumbling out. «I walked her home that night, Mum, and the next night, and, well. I'm going to marry

her. We've talked about it. I asked her on the last day, and she said yes.»

The kitchen was extremely quiet. Somewhere out in the yard, a gull screamed at a gull.

«She's American,» said Margaret.

«She's from Massachusetts. Yes.»

«I see.»

«Her mother died when she was twelve. Her dad's remarried and lives in Arizona and they don't talk much. She's, she's on her own, Mum. She's got a flat, and a cat, and two cardboard boxes of books that she's saved up all her life to buy. She's the cleverest person I've ever met.» He swallowed. «I think you'd like her.»

Margaret set down her fork, with great care, parallel to her knife.

There was a moment, a very small one, and she would remember it for the rest of her life, when she might have said the right thing. She felt the words rise in her throat like warm bread: *Oh, Daniel. Oh, love. I'm so glad.* She saw her son's face, open and shining and terrified, and she knew exactly what it cost him to sit there with that hope in his hands.

And what came out of her mouth was:

«How nice.»

It was the voice she used for the vicar's wife. It was the voice of a door closing in another room.

The light in Daniel's face did not go out all at once. It guttered, the way a candle does in a draught. He nodded slowly. «Right,»

he said. «Well. I suppose it's a shock.»

«I'm not shocked.»

«You look shocked.»

«I'm *eating.*» She lifted her fork again and put the lamb in her mouth, and chewed it, and it tasted like sawdust. «When is the wedding?»

«November. In Boston. A registry office, nothing fancy, her friends and a couple of colleagues. I thought you might, I thought it might be hard for you to travel, with the smokehouse. I know it's the winter run.»

He was giving her an exit. He was holding the door open with both hands, and Margaret, who had never in her life been able to say *yes* to a thing until she had walked all the way round it and checked it for cracks, stepped through.

«Yes,» she said. «The winter run. I couldn't possibly leave.»

Daniel's shoulders sagged, ever so slightly, as though he had been carrying something and it had just been confirmed that nobody would help him with it.

He finished his lamb. He helped with the washing-up. He kissed her on the cheek and went upstairs to his old room, whistling so tunelessly that she knew he was not happy, and she stood in the kitchen, with her hands in the greasy water, and thought: *I am a wicked old woman.*

Then she thought: *But why should it be me who has to be glad? Nobody asked me. Nobody ever asks the mother.*

Here is the truth, which Margaret Hartley would not tell

anybody for sixteen years: she was not angry. She was afraid. She had buried a husband three years before, and the house on Cinder Lane had been so empty since that she sometimes laid two places at the table and had to put one away again, and the only thing in the world that still walked through her front door at night with a loud, clumsy, living step was her son. If he went to Boston, she would be alone. And if he did not go to Boston, if the girl came to Saltby instead, then there would be a stranger at her table, in her kitchen, in her bed. A stranger with a *name,* and a Massachusetts accent, and a claim on the only person Margaret had left.

«Nora,» she said aloud, tasting it. It was a soft name, a fragile one, like the sound of a spoon in a china cup. It was not a Yorkshire name. It was not a name that had ever stood on a cold quay at five in the morning with its hands in the brine.

«Nora,» she said again, and her voice shook.

Behind her, the telephone rang.

She wiped her hands and picked it up. «Hartley's.»

«Margaret!» The voice was warm, rich and instantly recognisable: Roland Sykes, who had been Walter's solicitor and, for the past two years, the manager of the bank's small-business account. «I hear congratulations are in order.»

Margaret frowned. «Congratulations?»

«On the wedding. I had it from a friend of a friend who was at the trade fair. Boston, wasn't it? An American girl. How wonderful, Margaret, how very modern.»

She gripped the receiver. Daniel had told her ten minutes ago.

He had told no one else. He had come straight from the airport.

«Who told you that?» she asked.

«Small village, my dear,» said Roland Sykes, laughing gently. «Everyone knows everything. Now. About the little matter of the loan. I don't want to spoil your Sunday, but the bank does like to be tidy. Shall we say the end of next month?»

Margaret closed her eyes.

«The end of next month,» she said.

She put down the telephone. In the biscuit tin, behind the spare keys, the two folded letters seemed to stir, like sleeping animals. She had a son who was getting married to a stranger. She had a smokehouse that was losing money. She had a debt of forty-one thousand pounds, and nobody on this earth to tell.

Upstairs, Daniel's whistling had stopped. She did not go up.

Chapter Two: Six Months

The wedding took eleven minutes.

Nora Whitlock would remember them with perfect clarity: the beige carpet of the Boston registry office, the potted fern that dropped a leaf at the exact moment she said *I do,* the smell of floor polish, her friend Priya sobbing quietly into a handful of tissues. Daniel's hands were cold. His voice cracked on *forsaking all others.* When the registrar said «you may now kiss the bride,» he did, and then he looked at the empty chairs on the groom's side of the room, and she saw his face change and pretended she hadn't.

His mother had sent a card. It had arrived in the morning post, a cream envelope with a Yorkshire postmark and a stamp slightly crooked. Inside was a printed card with white lilies on the front, and underneath, in tight, upright handwriting: *Wishing you both every happiness. M. Hartley.* Folded behind it was a tea towel, linen, with HARTLEY & SONS embroidered in one corner.

Nora had held the tea towel for a long time.

«She's not good with words,» Daniel had said.

«She wrote *M. Hartley.* She signed her own son's wedding card with an initial.»

«She's shy.»

«Daniel. Nobody who is shy writes a card like a bank statement.»

But she had kept the tea towel. She had washed and ironed it and put it in the drawer where she kept the things she did not know what to do with. And she had told herself that on the day she met this woman, she would be gracious. She would be warm. She would win her over, the way she won over difficult clients and sceptical bookbinders: with patience, and attention, and a very light hand.

She had not known about the loan then.

Daniel told her in January, in the narrow kitchen of the flat they had moved to after the wedding, with the radiator ticking and snow slanting past the window. He had been quiet all evening. He sat at the table with a letter in front of him, and when she asked, he slid it across without looking up.

Final demand. Forty-one thousand, two hundred pounds.

«It's my father's debt,» he said. «He borrowed against the smokehouse after the lean years, and he never told her. Mum found out after he died. She's been paying the interest out of the takings for three years, and it's eating her alive. She won't say a word about it. I only know because the man at the bank, he's an old family friend, Mr. Sykes, he rang me in the hotel in August to, to *warn* me.»

«Warn you about what?»

«That if it isn't cleared by next spring, the bank will call it in. And they'll take the smokehouse. And the house with it.»

Nora read the letter twice. «Forty-one thousand pounds. That's, what, fifty-odd thousand dollars? Daniel, we can find

that. I've got savings. I can take on private commissions. We can sell the, the car, we can — »

«We can't. It's more than that, with the interest.» He ran both hands through his hair. «I've done the sums. I've done them every night for a month. There's only one thing that's going to clear it fast.»

She looked at him. And she knew. She knew before he said it, from the set of his jaw, from the way he would not meet her eyes. It was the expression of a man who had been brave for one very long day and did not know how to stop.

«The army pays a bonus,» he said quietly. «If you sign for a twelve-month overseas posting. It's thirty thousand, up front, plus wages. I talked to the recruiting sergeant last week. I'd be gone by May.»

«No.»

«Nora — »

«We've been married for two months!»

«I know.»

«You've never been in the army! You're a *fish smoker!*»

«I'm also thirty-two, fit, and I can drive a lorry,» said Daniel, with a hopeless little laugh. «They said I'd be in logistics. Supply convoys. Nowhere near the front, even if there was a front. Just a year, Nora. Twelve months. And then it's done, and Mum keeps the house, and we can start properly.»

She cried then. She hadn't meant to. She had always prided herself on not crying, on being the girl who stayed calm when

the glue went wrong and the vellum cracked, and she hated the sound of herself, a ragged, helpless noise. Daniel held her, and she felt his heart racing beneath his ribs like a trapped bird's.

«Where will I live?» she asked, into his shirt. «The lease on this flat ends in April.»

There was a long silence.

«I've been thinking,» he said, «that you could go to Saltby. Stay with Mum. Just until I'm back. You'd be company for her, and she'd be company for you, and you wouldn't have to pay rent, and — »

Nora lifted her head.

«Daniel,» she said, very slowly. «Your mother sent me a tea towel.»

«I know.»

«She has not once called me on the phone.»

«I know.»

«She thinks I'm a gold-digger who stole her only son.»

«She thinks no such thing,» said Daniel, who did not for one moment believe it himself. «She's just, she needs time. Both of you do. Once you're living in the same house, it'll all come right. You'll see.»

He was so tired, and so hopeful, and so completely, endearingly wrong, that she could not say the words that were burning in her mouth. So she said, «All right.»

And she hated herself for it for a very long time.

The soldier who left Boston on the first of May was a different man from the one she had married.

He was thinner. His hair was cropped to a pale fuzz. He wore a rucksack that looked too big for him and a boy's grin that did not reach his eyes. At the airport he kissed her for what felt like a quarter of an hour, and then he held her face between his hands, and said, «Write to me. Tell me everything. Every little thing, all right? The cat, and the books, and what you had for breakfast. I'll be starved for news.»

«I'll write,» she said.

«And be nice to Mum.»

«I'm always nice.»

«I know,» he said, and kissed her forehead. «That's why I'm not worried.»

It was the stupidest thing he ever said to her. She would turn it over in her mind for years.

Three days later, Nora Whitlock stood on the doorstep of Hartley House with two suitcases, a padded archival case, and a cat in a carrier who had not stopped screaming since Leeds. It was raining. The red door was closed. The brass knocker was shaped like a leaping fish, and she lifted it and let it fall.

She waited.

The door opened.

Margaret Hartley was shorter than Nora had imagined, and thinner, and absolutely upright. She wore a navy cardigan buttoned to the throat and a pair of pearl studs. Her silver hair

had been set that morning with the stiff precision of a woman who had visited the same hairdresser every Friday since 1981. Her eyes were Daniel's eyes, pale and grey-green, but they had been sharpened somewhere along the way, like a knife that has been used a great deal.

They looked at one another.

«You're early,» said Margaret.

«The taxi was fast,» said Nora. «Mrs. Hartley, it's so lovely to finally meet you. Thank you so much for having me, I know it must be — »

«Is that a cat?»

«Her name's Marmalade. She's very quiet, usually. She's only upset because of the journey.»

«There is a smokehouse,» said Margaret, «at the bottom of the garden. It is full of fish. I would not,» and she paused, and the next word fell like a dropped coin, «*advise* it.»

Nora, who had been awake for thirty-one hours, opened her mouth to say something clever, and found there was nothing in there. She stood on the step and felt the rain run down the back of her collar, and the tears she had been fighting since Heathrow rose and threatened to spill.

And Margaret Hartley, who was not a cruel woman, saw them.

She stepped back. She said, stiffly, «You had better come in.»

Chapter Three: Mrs. Hartley's Rules

The rules were pinned to the inside of the pantry door.

Nora found them on the third morning, when she went looking for the marmalade, not the cat, the actual marmalade, and instead discovered a sheet of lined paper, written in blue fountain pen, in the same upright hand that had signed the wedding card.

RULES OF THE HOUSE

1. Breakfast at six. Dinner at noon. Tea at five. Supper at eight. There is no eating between meals.

2. Shoes off at the door. Slippers in the basket. The blue ones were Walter's and are not to be worn.

3. The kitchen is mine. If you wish to cook, ask.

4. The smokehouse is not to be entered by anyone but Hartleys.

5. The back room of the smokehouse is not to be entered by anyone.

6. No telephone calls after nine in the evening, except from Daniel.

7. Do not move things.

Nora read the list from top to bottom, and then from bottom to top. Rule five was underlined. Twice.

«Is it a joke?» she asked the cat.

The cat, who had taken up residence on Walter's armchair and

had already shed on it with great ceremony, did not reply.

It was not a joke. By the end of the first week, Nora had learned that Margaret Hartley did not joke, in the way that the North Sea did not apologise. She had learned that the kettle must never be filled above the line, that the long-case clock must be wound on Sunday evenings and not otherwise, and that her own habit of leaving a book face-down on the arm of a chair was, in Margaret's words, «how a spine gets broken.» (This was the one thing on which they agreed.) She had been given the small room at the back, Daniel's old room, with the narrow iron bed and the pale rectangles on the wallpaper where the posters used to be. A damp patch the size of a dinner table spread across the ceiling.

She had written to Daniel every night. Long, cheerful letters, full of the cat, the books, the gulls, the people in the village who stared at her on the high street as if she were an escaped zoo animal. She told him about the bakery on Quay Street where the woman had slipped her a free scone. She told him she was learning to make tea «properly» and had been corrected four times. She said his mother was *a character.* She said she was *settling in.*

She did not tell him that Margaret had not spoken to her at supper for two days. She did not tell him about the evening she had offered to dry the dishes and Margaret had taken the cloth from her hand, *gently,* and said, «I would rather do it myself, thank you, then I shall know where everything is.» She did not tell him that she had walked down to the harbour on the fifth

night and sat on a bollard in the dark for an hour, listening to the water slap the stones, trying to remember what her own name sounded like when someone said it with warmth.

He was a long way away. He was frightened and tired, and the army censors read every line. What good would it do to send him her loneliness? She tucked it deep down, where she kept the other unhappy things, and licked the envelope, and wrote *Love, N.*

In the mornings she sat in the net loft above the smokehouse, which Margaret had grudgingly allowed her to use «since no one else will,» and worked on a battered Victorian atlas that a dealer in York had sent her by post. The loft was bright and dry, with a long window over the harbour. It was the first place in Saltby where she could breathe.

That was where she was, on the sixteenth day of her residence, when the smell of frying fish rose through the floorboards and her stomach turned over like a boat.

She made it to the loo with seconds to spare.

Afterwards she knelt on the cold tiles with her forehead against the porcelain, shaking, and counted backwards on her fingers. Then she counted again. Then she began, very quietly, to laugh.

She had been so tired lately. So hungry. So weepy, in a way she had put down to grief and isolation and the dreary Yorkshire spring.

A bell was ringing in her head, clear and enormous, like the one on the harbour bar on stormy nights.

Ten minutes later she was standing in Boots on the high street, buying a pregnancy test from a bored teenager who looked at her ring and said, «Congratulations, love,» without being asked.

Two lines. Very pink. Very sure.

She sat on the edge of the bath with the test in her hand, and she thought of Daniel, in a barracks somewhere in the heat, with a rifle he'd never wanted and a debt he'd never made. She thought: *He will be so happy.* She thought: *He will be so frightened.* She thought, with a lurch, of the woman downstairs, the woman who had pinned *Do not move things* to the pantry door and had not once, in sixteen days, called her by her name.

She thought: *I am going to have Margaret Hartley's grandchild.*

It was the most terrifying sentence she had ever put together.

She did not intend to tell Margaret that day.

She intended to wait until she'd spoken to Daniel, until the doctor had confirmed, until she had worked out the words. She spent the afternoon in the net loft, repairing the same quarter-inch of cracked leather over and over, and at five o'clock she came down to tea.

Margaret was at the range. She did not turn round.

«You were sick this morning,» she said.

Nora froze with her hand on the back of a chair.

«The bathroom wall is very thin,» said Margaret. «And I have been sick myself, four times. I know the sound.»

«Mrs. Hartley — »

«How many weeks?»

There was no point lying. «Ten. I think. I haven't seen a doctor.»

Margaret turned round at last.

She stood there, with the wooden spoon in her hand, and Nora, who had spent every day for sixteen days trying to read that face, saw for the first time that it was shaking. Not with anger. Something older and stranger: a look of grief and hunger and terror, as though a window had been flung open in a house that had been shut for years.

For three heartbeats, neither of them breathed.

«Does my son know?» said Margaret, in a voice like thin ice.

«No. I only found out an hour ago. I'm going to write to him tonight. I thought I should tell you first. Since it's your house.»

The spoon trembled. Margaret set it down on the range. She wiped her hands on her apron, and wiped them again, and then she said, in a rough, careful, terribly formal voice:

«You will need to eat properly. Eggs. Greens. Not so much tea.»

That was all. She turned back to the stove and began to stir something that did not need stirring.

But Nora, who was watching her back, saw her lift one hand, quickly, to her eyes.

That night, after supper, there was a mug of warm milk outside the door of the small room. And a plate of dry crackers. And, folded beneath the plate, a square of lined paper with seven rules

on it, and an eighth, newly added in blue ink:

8. Rest.

Nora sat on her narrow iron bed, with the paper in her hands, and for the first time in sixteen days she felt something that was not quite hope, but was the same shape.

And she did not know, because nobody had told her, because the only person who could have was thirty-one miles away in a hospital car park reading a letter he would never finish, that downstairs, in the biscuit tin behind the spare keys, a third letter from the bank had arrived that morning, and that Margaret Hartley had put it away without opening it, and that tomorrow a tall man in a charcoal coat would knock at the back door with three slow raps and two quick ones.

And she did not know that by the time her daughter was born, in the winter snow, the two women in this house would have tried, in every way two women can, to destroy one another.

Chapter Four: The Ledger

By the end of June, Nora knew three things about Margaret Hartley.

She knew that Margaret rose at four every morning, winter and summer, and walked down to the smokehouse in the dark with a torch and a flask of tea. She knew that Margaret ate nothing but toast until noon, and then, at exactly twelve, sat at the kitchen table and consumed a plate of whatever the kiln had produced, with the focus of a surgeon. And she knew, with a certainty that grew every day, that the Hartley smokehouse was not making the money Margaret said it was.

The third thing she found out by accident.

It was a Thursday, wet and warm, the sky the colour of old dishwater. Margaret had gone to Whitby for the day, to see a man about a new kiln door, and had left Nora in charge of two things: the pie in the oven and the telephone. The pie was no trouble. The telephone rang at eleven, and it was a woman from a Leeds delicatessen, wanting to know why her order of two hundred kippers had not arrived.

«I'm so sorry,» said Nora. «I'm just the, I'm family. Let me look into it. Can I call you back?»

She went into the little room off the hall that Walter had used as an office. It was a cramped, cold space that smelled of paper and pipe tobacco, with a rolltop desk and a green metal filing

cabinet and a wall calendar still turned to March, three years ago. Rule seven said *Do not move things.* Nora did not move anything. She merely looked.

On the desk lay a large black ledger, open at last month's page.

She had spent eight years learning to read what the eye wants to skip: the faint shadow of an erased number, the way a forged signature pools differently in the paper, the little hesitation in a line of ink that tells you the writer was afraid. She did not mean to study the ledger. She only meant to find the Leeds order. But her eye fell on the columns, and some quiet professional instinct, the one that had saved a priceless Book of Hours from a careless restorer, woke up and said: *That's wrong.*

The sums did not match.

Not by a little. Margaret's handwriting was beautiful: small and upright and unhurried. She recorded every kipper, every crate, every bag of oak chips. But the totals at the bottom of each month had been written by a different pen, a different hand, in a looser, more flowing script, and they were *lower.* Every month, by a few hundred pounds. And every month, the difference had been carried across to a line labelled *Bank charges (R.S.).*

R.S.

Nora sat down in Walter's chair.

She turned back through the pages. March. February. The previous autumn. In every case, the same signature in the margin, the same loose cursive, the same small theft hidden in a line of arithmetic. Someone had been going through this ledger every

month, and adding to it, and reducing the totals, so that Margaret would believe the smokehouse was in worse shape than it was.

She copied the figures onto a sheet of paper. Her hands were not quite steady.

She was still sitting there when the front door opened and Margaret's voice said, from the hall, «Nora? What on earth are you doing?»

The woman stood in the doorway with her handbag over her arm and a face like a slammed gate. Her eyes went to the desk, to the open ledger, to the paper in Nora's hand.

«The Leeds delicatessen rang,» said Nora quickly. «They said an order was missing, I was only looking for the — »

«That is my husband's desk.»

«I know. I'm sorry. But Mrs. Hartley, listen, there's something in here — »

«Rule seven,» said Margaret.

«Please, just look at the totals. Somebody has been — »

«*Rule seven.*» She crossed the room in three steps and closed the ledger with a clap that made Nora jump. «You have been in this house for two months. You have been fed and housed and treated with every courtesy, and you walk into my husband's study the minute my back is turned, and you go through our private accounts. Is that how it is done in Boston? Is that what a wife does?»

«I am not going through anything. I'm trying to tell you that you are being robbed.»

The silence was extraordinary.

Margaret Hartley stood very straight, with the ledger pressed to her chest, and Nora saw something move behind her eyes, a flicker of something wild and cornered.

«Robbed,» she repeated.

«The numbers at the bottom of each page. They're in a different hand. R.S. has been taking small amounts every month. I think it's Mr. Sykes. Somebody at the bank has been doctoring the records so you'd believe you were in debt.»

«I *am* in debt.»

«Maybe not as much as you think.»

For a moment Nora truly believed that she had done it. That she had reached through the cold, upright, impenetrable woman and touched something real. She saw Margaret's lips part. She saw her eyes fill.

Then they cleared.

«Roland Sykes,» said Margaret, in a voice like ice cracking on a pond, «sat at my husband's bedside the night he died. He has been a friend to this family for forty years. And you have been in Saltby for two months. Which of you do you suppose I am going to believe?»

«I am not asking you to believe me. I'm asking you to *look*.»

«Get out.»

«Mrs. Hartley — »

«Get out of this room, Nora. Go upstairs. I do not wish to see you.»

It was the first time Margaret had said her name aloud. It sounded like a curse.

Nora left. She climbed the stairs to the small room with its damp ceiling and its iron bed, sat down, and put both hands over her stomach, where, three inches beneath her fingers, a creature the size of a lime was quietly turning cartwheels in the dark.

«Well,» she whispered. «That went well.»

Downstairs, in the little study, Margaret Hartley sat in her husband's chair with the ledger open before her, and read the numbers again. And again. And slowly, with a creeping, sickening coldness, she began to see what the girl had seen.

She did not go upstairs to say so. She did not say so that night, or the next day, or the day after that.

She was a proud woman, and some things are harder to admit than a lie.

Chapter Five: Maggie McAllister

She had been called Maggie once.

Nobody in Saltby remembered it now. Nobody remembered that Margaret Hartley, the most upright and unbending woman on the North Yorkshire coast, had been born Margaret Anne McAllister in a tenement in Govan, Glasgow, the fourth of seven children of a shipyard rivetter who drank, and a mother who did not. Nobody remembered the shabby cardigan, the cardboard suitcase, the accent so broad that when she first opened her mouth in the Saltby fish market, a woman had laughed out loud and asked her to say it again.

She had been nineteen. She had come to Yorkshire to work as a packer for the Hartley smokehouse, to send money home. And on her third day, a tall, shy, ginger-haired boy of twenty-one had dropped a crate of herring on her foot, and apologised so desperately, and blushed so hard, that she had started to laugh and could not stop.

Walter Hartley. Heir to the smokehouse, to the house on Cinder Lane, and to the formidable good opinion of his mother, Agnes Hartley, who had looked at Margaret on the day they met the way a farmer looks at a cow with a bad leg.

«A Scotswoman,» Agnes said, over the Sunday roast, in front of the whole family. «From the *shipyards.* Well, Walter. I suppose it's one way to bring a bit of colour into the line.»

There had been seven years of that. Seven years of cutting remarks at the table, of *accidentally* misplaced keys, of dresses that had mysteriously shrunk in the wash. Agnes never raised her voice. She was far too clever for that. She merely observed, quietly, that the girl was not *quite* one of them, that her vowels would never do, that perhaps, for the sake of the children, she might consider taking elocution lessons. On the day Margaret miscarried her first baby, Agnes had stood at the foot of the bed and said, «Well. These things happen when a girl is not strong.»

Margaret had never forgiven her. She had also never answered back. She had put her head down, and learned the recipes, and risen at four every morning for fifty years, and one day she woke up and realised that she was the one in the dark at the smokehouse and Agnes was in the churchyard, and that nobody in the village could remember who had been the outsider.

She thought of that often, now. In the long grey afternoons, with the girl's light footsteps pacing the floor above her head.

She is not you, said Walter's voice, gentle and dry.

«I know she isn't.»

Then why are you doing to her what Mother did to you?

«I'm not.»

Maggie.

«I am *not,*» said Margaret, aloud, to the empty kitchen, and the tears rose in her eyes, hot and furious. «I'm protecting her. I'm protecting the lot of them. If Roland is what she says he is, then Daniel's wife has no business being near this, she is going to

have a *baby.* She'll go running to Daniel, and he'll come home, and he'll lose his place in the army, and the whole year will have been for nothing. I will not have it. I will *not.*»

She was lying, of course. She knew it. Under the anger was something simpler and more shameful: she could not bear to be seen. Not by this clever, quiet, educated girl, with her good vowels and her books and her dreadful, kind, patient eyes. Not at this exact moment, when the ledger had just shown her how very foolish she had been.

So she did the only thing she knew how to do. She withdrew into a wall of rules.

Over the next fortnight, Margaret Hartley became formidable in a way that astonished even herself. She rationed the tea. She moved the sugar. She commented, at supper, that some women let themselves *go* when they were expecting. She watched Nora eat, and corrected the way she held her fork. When Nora spent an afternoon in the garden, planting a row of lavender by the back wall, Margaret dug it all up the next morning and replaced it with potatoes. «A garden is for eating,» she said.

Nora said nothing. She looked at the potatoes and at Margaret, and then she went upstairs and wrote a very long letter to a man in the desert, in which she mentioned that his mother was «in good spirits.»

And on the fifteenth of July, a tall man in a long grey coat came to the back door, and knocked three times slow and twice fast, and Margaret, who had been dreading it for two weeks,

opened it.

«Margaret,» said Roland Sykes. His face was drawn into lines of deep concern. «We need to talk about the future.»

She let him into the kitchen. She poured him tea. And Nora, who had been about to come down for a glass of water, stopped on the stairs, with her hand on the banister, and listened.

«The bank is anxious,» said Roland, gently. «It's the kiln. The inspectors came last week, you know. They say it's a fire hazard. They'll need it replaced by the end of the year, or the licence will lapse, and with the loan outstanding…» He sighed. «I hate to say it, Margaret. I truly do. But I've spoken to a gentleman who might help. A developer. He's prepared to make a very generous offer for the harbourfront. Enough to clear the debt, with a little left over for a nice cottage somewhere warm.»

«The smokehouse is not for sale.»

«Of course. Of course not. But think of Daniel. Think of the girl and the baby.»

There was a pause.

«What do you know about the baby?» said Margaret, very quietly.

«Why, just what everyone knows, my dear. The whole village knows. Mrs. Pickering saw her in the chemist.»

«And whose idea was it to tell Mrs. Pickering?»

Roland smiled. It was a lovely smile, patient and sad and understanding. «I'll leave the paperwork with you,» he said, drawing a long envelope from his briefcase. «Do read it. Take

your time. But not too much time, Margaret. The bank is not famous for its patience.»

He left. The front door shut. And in the silence that followed, Margaret Hartley, who had never run from anything in her life, sat at her own kitchen table with her hands pressed flat on either side of the envelope and shook like a leaf.

On the stairs, Nora held her breath.

Then, very softly, she turned and went back up to her room. She sat on the bed. She took out a pencil and a sheet of paper and began, in her small, neat, scholarly hand, to write down everything she had heard.

It was the beginning of a list. By the end of the year it would run to eleven pages.

Chapter Six: What Daniel Doesn't Know

The telephone calls came on Sunday evenings, at seven, from a number in a country with a name Nora could not pronounce.

There was always a delay on the line, a half-second lag that made every conversation feel like talking across a canyon. Daniel's voice came and went, cracked with static, always too cheerful, always too quick. He told her about the heat, and the sand in his boots, and a corporal from Newcastle named Gaz who had adopted a stray dog and called it Sergeant. He asked about the baby, the doctor's appointment, the little bump he had seen in the photograph she sent. He asked about his mother.

«She's fine,» said Nora.

«Is she being kind to you?»

«She's very kind.»

«She's not always easy. I know that. I keep thinking about the two of you, in that big house, getting on each other's nerves.»

«We're getting on,» said Nora, and in the dark of the hall she pressed her palm against the cold wallpaper and closed her eyes, «like a house on fire.»

«What?»

«Like a house on fire. It's an expression. It means very well.»

«I never heard that,» Daniel said, laughing, and the line crackled, and cut out, and when it came back he was talking about a football match.

Somewhere down the stairs, a door closed very softly. Nora knew it was the kitchen. Margaret was in there, standing very straight at the range, pretending not to listen. On Sunday evenings she always found a reason to be in the kitchen at seven.

When the call finished, Nora put down the receiver and stood for a long moment in the hall. Then she went into the kitchen.

Margaret was scrubbing a pot that was already clean.

«He sounds well,» Nora said.

«He does.»

«I didn't tell him about the loan. Or Mr. Sykes. Or the ledger.»

The scrubbing stopped.

«I wasn't asking you to,» said Margaret.

«I know. But I thought you should know that I didn't.»

There was a long silence. Water dripped from the tap. Outside, the evening was gold and grey over the harbour, and the gulls were wheeling and quarrelling in the last of the light.

«He is not to be worried,» said Margaret at length, to the sink. «He has enough to carry.»

«Yes.»

«If he were to be distracted, out there, he might make a mistake. They have guns. Lorries. He is not,» and her voice caught, just barely, «he has never been a careful boy.»

Nora had never heard anything so close to confession from that rigid mouth. She wanted to cross the kitchen and put her arms round her. She wanted it so badly that her hands twitched.

She did not. She said instead, quietly, «I agree.»

Margaret turned her head, just a little.

It was the beginning of something. Neither of them called it that. It had no name; it was only a small, fragile, unsaid agreement, a thread no thicker than a cobweb strung between two women who had nothing in common except the one man they both loved, and who were both, for his sake, lying to him.

But a thread is a thread. And before the summer ended, it would be tested.

It began, as the worst things do, on a perfectly ordinary Tuesday.

It was the second week of September. Nora was thirty weeks pregnant, enormous and uncomfortable, and had developed a craving for the sweet brown bread from the Quay Street bakery that she was ashamed to admit to. She woke before dawn with her back aching and lay listening to the gulls. By six, she knew something was different.

The house was too quiet.

There was no clatter from the kitchen. No smell of toast. No footsteps in the hall. She dressed slowly, with difficulty, and went downstairs, and found the kitchen cold and empty, the range unlit, the kettle on its hook.

She looked in the yard. She looked in the pantry. She went to the smokehouse, in her slippers, pushing open the heavy door with both hands, and found the great kiln dark and silent, the racks of herring hanging like ghosts.

«Mrs. Hartley?»

Nothing.

Then, from the very back of the smokehouse, behind the stacks of oak chips, a faint sound. A single indrawn breath, like someone trying very hard not to make a noise.

She followed it. She walked down the long, dim corridor between the racks, her slippers whispering on the stone, until she reached the farthest wall. And there, set into the whitewashed brick, was a low wooden door she had never seen open.

It was ajar.

A thin line of lamplight fell across the floor.

«Rule five,» Nora whispered. *The back room of the smokehouse is not to be entered by anyone.*

She put out a hand. The wood was cold. Slowly, very slowly, she pushed.

Margaret Hartley was sitting on the floor.

She sat in the middle of a small stone chamber lined with shelves, with her legs folded under her like a girl and her grey hair coming loose from its pins. Around her lay open boxes, drifts of yellowed paper, old black-and-white photographs, a battered tin trunk with its lid thrown back. In her lap she held a bundle of letters tied with blue ribbon. Her face was wet.

She looked up. She did not seem surprised.

«I found his handwriting,» she said in a small, strange voice. «Walter wrote to me. Every week for forty years, and I never once knew. He used to come here and write, and put them in the

trunk, and I thought he was, I thought he was *drinking*. I thought he was ashamed of me.» She held up a letter, and her hand was trembling. «I was wrong. He was writing to say he loved me.»

Nora knelt, slowly and awkwardly, on the cold flags beside her. She did not touch her. She did not say anything at all.

And after a long time, Margaret said, without looking up:

«The sweetness in the kipper pie. You asked me once what it was.»

«You said it was a family secret.»

«It is.» She drew a long, shuddering breath. «It's Eliza Pennock's. My husband's great-great-grandmother. A pinch of dried bog myrtle and a spoonful of heather honey, in the brine. She wrote it in a book that was lost in the fire. My mother-in-law kept the secret, and she died without telling me, and I spent thirty years trying to puzzle it out. I only learned it last winter, from a letter in this trunk.» She laughed, wetly. «I have never told a soul. And now I have told you, and I do not know why.»

«Because I'm here,» said Nora gently. «And I'm not going anywhere.»

Margaret turned her head. The grey-green eyes were red-rimmed and very tired, and for the first time they looked at Nora without armour.

«Everyone goes,» she said.

And just then, over the whisper of the wind and the slow tick of the cooling kiln, came the sound of the smokehouse door being pulled open, and a voice calling cheerfully, in a tone that

was, to Nora's ears, newly and horribly familiar:

«Margaret? Are you in there, my dear? I did knock.»

The two women looked at one another.

In the chamber's single lamp, Nora saw her mother-in-law's face change. The hurt and the wildness drained out of it, replaced, in one second flat, by something hard and clear and watchful: the face of a woman who had survived Agnes Hartley, and a miscarriage, and a drunken father, and forty years of silence. It was the face of a fighter.

«Quick,» whispered Margaret. «The trunk. Lock it. Put the letters inside your cardigan.»

«What?»

«Do it, girl. He mustn't see the back room. Not yet. Not until we know what he wants.»

Nora, who had not, in two months, been given a single order by this woman that she had been glad to obey, scooped the letters into her cardigan, slammed the trunk shut, and took Margaret's hand.

It was the first time they had touched.

It was dry and cool and surprisingly strong, and it gripped hers so tightly that it hurt.

«On three,» said Margaret. «We walk out together. We say nothing. And whatever he says,» and her mouth twisted in a terrible, beautiful, ferocious little smile, «we *smile.*»

Chapter Seven: Bog Myrtle and Ink

Roland Sykes stood in the doorway of the smokehouse with the grey morning behind him, and for one long, suspended moment, nobody moved.

The light fell in a pale slab across the flagstones. It touched the dark ranks of herring hanging from the rafters, which swayed a little in the draught, silver and slack-jawed, like a congregation of the drowned. It touched the black mouth of the kiln. It touched Margaret Hartley, who had come out of the corridor with her hair pinned neatly back and her face arranged into an expression of mild domestic irritation, as if she had merely stepped out to deal with a leaking tap. And it touched Nora, standing a pace behind her, with one hand spread over the swell of her belly and the other pressed flat against her cardigan, where eleven letters tied in blue ribbon pressed against her ribs like a second heartbeat.

«Margaret,» said Roland, warmly. «There you are. I did knock, you know. Twice.»

«I'm sure you did,» said Margaret. «I was seeing to the oak chips. The new delivery is damp.»

She said it so smoothly, so tartly, with such perfect weariness, that Nora felt a shiver of awe go through her. She had watched this woman be rigid, and cruel, and broken. She had never before watched her *act,* and she understood, with a small astonished jolt, that Margaret Hartley had been performing the part of

Margaret Hartley for fifty years. Every upright movement, every crisp consonant, every closed-mouthed glance: it was a costume, painstakingly stitched, and underneath it was a frightened girl from Govan who had once been laughed at in a fish market.

She thought: *We are the same.* And the thought was so large that for a moment she could not breathe.

«And Nora,» said Roland, turning his gentle, concerned face towards her. «My dear. Should you be out of bed? In your condition?»

«I like the fresh air,» said Nora.

«In a smokehouse?»

«I like the smell, too.» She smiled. It felt like pulling a nail out of her own jaw. «It reminds me of my grandfather's kitchen.»

There was a pause. It was only a very small pause. But Nora, who had spent eight years watching the faintest flaws appear in the surface of ancient paper, saw something shift in the solicitor's eyes: a flicker, a tiny cold contraction, like a pupil closing against bright light. His glance travelled down, over her face, her throat, the ridge of her cardigan where the letters lay. It rested there for exactly one second too long.

Then he smiled. «How charming,» he said.

He asked Margaret whether she had given further thought to the developer's offer. Margaret said she had not, and did not expect to, and that if he wished to discuss the matter he might do so in the kitchen, over tea, like a Christian. He said that would be delightful. He walked out first. The women followed, a respectful

three paces behind, and as they crossed the yard under the low, bruised sky, with the gulls shrieking above the chimney and the smell of brine thick on the wind, Margaret's hand found Nora's again and squeezed it once, hard.

It said, as clearly as speech: *Not a word.*

It said: *Thank you.*

It said a third thing, too, which Nora did not dare to read, because if she was wrong, it would hurt more than she could bear.

The letters took Nora three weeks to restore.

She did it at night, in the net loft, by the green glow of a desk lamp, with the sea breathing slowly against the pilings below and the child kicking under her ribs. There were two hundred and twelve in all, written over forty-one years in the slanting copperplate of a man who had left school at fourteen. Some were mere scraps: *Maggie, you looked beautiful this morning when you thought nobody could see.* Some ran to several pages. All were damp, curling, foxed with mould where the old tin trunk had leaked, and all were so tender, so unguarded, so achingly private, that Nora felt like a thief every time she touched one.

She worked with a soft brush and a bone folder and a bowl of distilled water. She flattened the brittle creases between sheets of blotting paper. She lifted the stains with a gel she mixed herself, patiently, a pinprick at a time. It was slow, delicate, holy work, and it was the first time in months that she had felt entirely herself.

On the nineteenth night she turned over a letter dated 1989 and read, before she could stop herself:

Maggie, I sat by the harbour today and thought about the day you came. You stepped off the bus in that terrible green coat, with your suitcase tied up with string, and you looked at the sea as if you meant to arrest it. I thought: Walter Hartley, you will never in your whole life be good enough for that woman. And I have spent thirty-one years trying to be.

Nora set down the letter and pressed the heel of her hand against her mouth.

She thought of her own mother, dead when Nora was twelve, of the sharp clean smell of her hands, of the way she hummed when she kneaded bread. She thought of the long, lonely years afterwards, in a house where nobody had ever said such things aloud. She thought: *Nobody has ever written me a letter like that.* She thought of Daniel, in his desert, with his shy, awkward, enormous heart, and a great wave of longing rose in her, so fierce it frightened her.

When she had finished, she laid each restored letter flat between sheets of acid-free tissue, tied the bundle with fresh ribbon, and carried it down through the sleeping house.

Margaret was in the kitchen. It was nearly three in the morning, and she sat at the table in her dressing gown, quite alone, with a single lamp, a cup of tea gone cold, and an expression of such profound loneliness that Nora almost turned back.

«I couldn't sleep,» said Margaret, without looking up.

«No. Neither could I.» She set the bundle down gently on the oilcloth. «I wanted you to have these. They're dry now. They're safe. They won't crumble.»

Margaret stared at the pile of paper. Her hand rose, quivered, and fell.

«I can't,» she said, in a cracked whisper. «I can't read them. If I read them, he'll be dead.»

«He is dead,» said Nora, very gently.

«I know that!» It came out as a sob. «I know it, I know it, I have known it for three years and four months, but I have not *said* it, and the letters, if I read them, then it will be true, because there won't be any more. There will never be another one. This is all I have left of him.»

Nora sat down.

She was heavy, and clumsy, and her back ached, and she had no idea what to do. She had never known what to do with grief. So she did the only thing she could think of: she reached across the table and took Margaret's thin, cold hands between her own, and held them, and said nothing at all.

They sat that way for a long time. The lamp hissed. The wind sighed round the chimney. Somewhere in the house, the long-case clock ticked on through the dark, and Marmalade came padding in on soft feet and wound herself, purring, round both their ankles.

«Read me one,» said Margaret, at last. «I can't do it myself.

But you could read me one.»

So Nora read her the one about the green coat.

And Margaret Hartley put her head down on the kitchen table, among the cold teacups and the old black ledger and the corner of Mrs. Beeton, and wept for the first time in three years, with the great harsh unlovely sobs of a woman who has held herself upright for so long that she has forgotten how to bend.

Nora stroked her hair. It was silver and thin and smelled of woodsmoke.

This, she thought, in a wild, bewildered tenderness, *is what it costs to be loved. This is the price.*

And for the first time, she was not afraid of paying.

Autumn came to Saltby in a fortnight of copper and rain.

The moors above the town turned the colour of rust and old wine. The heather went brown and brittle; the bracken curled; the sea turned the dull pewter of a gun barrel and began to throw itself against the harbour wall with a long, tired, thunderous patience. In the mornings, Nora woke to the smell of woodsmoke and cold, and the shrill voices of the gulls, and the soft, bumping weight of the child turning over in her belly. At night she lay with her hands on her stomach and listened to the old house settle and creak around her, and thought, with a kind of astonished gratitude: *Somebody is awake down there. Somebody is keeping the range alight.*

On the first of October, Margaret took her up on to the moor

to gather bog myrtle.

It was a long, steep, muddy walk, and Nora, thirty-three weeks gone and out of breath, would have refused if she had dared. But Margaret did not ask. She simply appeared at the foot of the stairs in a battered waxed coat and a pair of green wellingtons, with a flask and a pair of secateurs, and said, «You'll want proper boots.»

They went up together through the thin gold light. The wind came at them in long, cold gusts, smelling of peat and salt and sheep. Below them the whole harbour lay folded in mist, grey roofs and blue smoke and the thin white line of the breakers; above them, on the ridge, a single hawk hung motionless against the sky. Margaret strode ahead without a word, her back as straight as a rake. Nora trailed behind, hand in the small of her back, trying not to pant.

At the top, in a hollow where the ground went spongy and black, Margaret knelt and showed her the plant.

«Here. Grey-green. Smell it.»

Nora crushed a leaf between her fingers. The scent rose, resinous and sweet and wild, with an edge of bitterness, like pine and honey and something older, something that went back to a Yorkshire kitchen two hundred years ago, to a cook named Eliza Pennock stooping on these same moors with a basket on her arm.

«That's it,» Nora breathed. «That's the sweetness.»

«That's the sweetness.» Margaret sat back on her heels. Her cheeks were pink with cold, and for a moment, in the clear thin

light, she looked twenty years younger, a girl on a hill, with the whole sky open above her. «I never knew I'd tell a soul. I used to think if the secret got out, the whole house would fall down. But it's only a plant, isn't it? It's only a bit of leaf.»

«It's a plant,» Nora agreed. «And a woman who knew what to do with it.»

Margaret looked at her. The grey-green eyes shone, wet and fierce.

«I have not been kind to you,» she said.

«No.»

«I want you to know that I know it.»

«I do know it,» said Nora, and smiled, and put her hand out, and Margaret took it, and pulled her up out of the heather.

They filled two baskets. They walked home in the long amber evening, arm in arm, not speaking, while the lamps came on one by one in the cottages below and the sea lay behind them like a sheet of dark glass.

It was the happiest afternoon of Nora's whole year.

It lasted exactly forty-eight days.

Chapter Eight: The Night of the Snow

The first snow of November fell on the eighteenth, and it did not stop.

It began at dusk, as a few idle flakes drifting past the kitchen window, and Margaret, shutting the shutters, said, «We'll have a night of it.» By seven o'clock the yard was white. By nine, the wind had risen to a howl, flinging the snow in long hissing sheets against the glass, and the whole house shuddered on its foundations like a ship at anchor. The lights went out at ten. Margaret lit the oil lamps and banked up the range, and the two women sat in the kitchen in the amber glow with a pot of tea between them and the cat in Nora's lap, listening to the storm.

It was nine days before the due date. Nora had been uncomfortable all evening: a dull, deep ache that came and went in her lower back, a tightening across her belly like a hand slowly closing. She had said nothing. It was *only* Braxton Hicks. The books were very clear about that. It was only a false alarm, brought on by the cold.

At eleven-fifteen, with no warning at all, something inside her gave way with a soft, wet, unmistakable *pop.*

She went white.

«Nora?» Margaret half rose. «What is it?»

«I think,» said Nora, in a voice that did not seem to belong to her, «my waters have broken.»

There was a silence.

Outside, the storm threw itself against the shutters. A gust slammed down the chimney and sent a puff of smoke into the room. The lamp flames swayed.

«Right,» said Margaret, and stood up very straight, and Nora saw, with a small shock, that she had gone pale as paper. «Right. I shall telephone the ambulance.»

She crossed the hall. Nora heard the receiver lifted. She heard a long, flat, empty silence. She heard Margaret say, in a voice that was too calm, «The line is dead.»

The wind screamed. Something heavy crashed against the roof and slid away.

«The road?» Nora managed.

«Drifted over by now, I should think. The Whitby road floods in a gale, and the snow's been coming since five.» Margaret returned to the kitchen doorway and stood there, one hand gripping the frame, while the lamplight threw her shadow huge and trembling up the wall. «The nearest hospital is Scarborough. It is eighteen miles. Nobody is going to get through to us before morning.»

«Before *morning?*»

«Do not panic.»

«I am not panicking!» cried Nora, a little hysterically, and then the first real contraction took her, a vast, slow, tearing wave that began in her spine and rolled forward and *down* until she thought her body must split in half, and she gripped the table

with both hands and heard herself make a sound she had never made in all her life.

When it passed, she was on her knees on the flagstones, with the cat fled under the dresser and her forehead pressed to the cold wood of a chair. Her hair was stuck to her cheeks. She was sobbing, and she could not remember starting.

«Daniel,» she said. «Oh God, I want Daniel.»

And Margaret was on the floor beside her.

She knelt there in her stockinged feet, in her good navy cardigan, with her pearl studs and her carefully set hair, and took Nora's face in both her cold, dry hands, and said, in a voice Nora had never heard before, low and rough and absolutely steady:

«Look at me. Nora. Look at me. I have had three babies in my time, and I lost two of them, and I have helped half the women in this village through their labours, because the midwife is a fool. I am going to get you through this. Do you understand? You are not alone. I will not leave you. Not for one second.»

Nora stared at her. The lamp glittered in Margaret's grey-green eyes, huge and fierce and wet.

«You promise?» she whispered, like a child.

«On Walter's grave,» said Margaret Hartley. «On my own life. I promise.»

It was the longest night of Nora's life.

She would remember it afterwards in pieces, as one remembers a fever: the roar of the wind in the chimney; the oily

gold of the lamplight on the whitewashed walls; the smell of hot water and carbolic and woodsmoke. The sharp, wet slap of snow against the shutters. The pain, which came in waves, each one higher than the last, so that she began to think of it not as a thing that happened to her but as a vast black ocean in which she was drowning, over and over, and each time found herself dragged back to the surface by the same hard, cool, unyielding hands.

Margaret had carried her upstairs. She had stripped the iron bed in the small room and spread an oilcloth and old sheets over the mattress, and boiled kettles on the range, and torn linen into strips, and she moved through all of it with a swift, silent, ferocious competence, as if she had been waiting fifty years for this exact night. She talked incessantly. She talked about Walter's mother, and the time the kiln caught fire in 1978, and the smell of Glasgow in the rain. She talked about nothing. It did not matter what she said. It was her voice that held Nora to the earth.

At two in the morning Nora said, in a thin high thread of panic, «I can't do it.»

«You can.»

«I *can't.* It's too much. It's tearing me in half. I want to stop.»

«There is no stopping,» said Margaret. «There is only the next one. And the next. And then it's over.» She wiped Nora's face with a cool wet cloth. «I'll tell you something. When I was in labour with Daniel, nineteen hours, and Walter was a useless lump in the corridor, and his mother stood at the end of the bed and said, „Well, if the girl cannot manage it, perhaps we should

send for a proper woman." I wanted to kill her. I wanted to get up off that bed and strangle her with her own pearls. And I thought: *No. I'll do this. I'll do it out of spite.* And I did.»

A hoarse, helpless laugh broke out of Nora's throat. «Out of spite?»

«It's the best fuel there is,» said Margaret grimly. «Get angry. Think of me. Think of what a dreadful old besom I've been to you. Hate me, if it helps.»

«I don't hate you.»

«Then hate the snow.»

«I hate the snow,» said Nora, through her teeth, and another wave rose up and took her under.

At four in the morning, the wind dropped.

The silence that followed was so sudden and so enormous that for a moment Nora thought she had died. The shutters stopped rattling. The chimney stopped moaning. The whole house held its breath, and in the strange blue hush she could hear the soft pattering of snow on the glass, and her own ragged breathing, and, very faintly, far below, the sea, rising and falling like the breath of an immense sleeping animal.

«That's it,» said Margaret, quietly. She was kneeling at the foot of the bed, her sleeves rolled to the elbow, her hair in wild grey streamers about her face. She looked exhausted, and exalted, and about a hundred years old. «Now. When the next one comes, you push. Hard as you can. I'll tell you when to stop.»

«I can't.»

«You *can.* You are Daniel's wife. You are a Hartley. I do not care what your name was. Push.»

Nora pushed.

She pushed until the world went red and then white and then black at the edges. She pushed until she was a creature made entirely of effort, of muscle and sinew and animal will, a mountain being split by a river. She felt the burning, the huge, terrible stretching, the sense of something vast and alive and fierce forcing its way down into the world, and she screamed, and from very far away she heard Margaret's voice, steady as a rock, saying:

«Good girl. Good girl. That's it. I can see the head. She's got dark hair. One more. One more, my darling. One *more.*»

Her darling.

The word went through Nora like a blade of light. And then, with a rush and a slither and a gasp, it was over, and the room was filled with a thin, outraged, furious wail.

Margaret Hartley sat back on her heels with a slippery, squalling, purple-faced bundle in her hands.

The lamp wavered. The snow whispered at the window. And for a moment nobody in the room spoke, because the whole of time had condensed into one small point, and in that point there was a tiny, furious girl with a crumpled face and a mop of damp black hair, waving two minuscule fists at the universe.

«A girl,» said Margaret, in a voice Nora hardly recognised. It was cracked, and shaking, and filled with a wonder so naked

and enormous that it was almost painful to hear. «Oh, Nora. Oh, my dear. It's a *girl.*»

She wrapped the baby in a warm towel and laid her, with infinite care, on Nora's chest.

Nora looked down.

Two dark eyes, huge and unfocused and shining like wet slate, looked back at her. A tiny, perfect hand curled round her finger, and held on with a strength that stopped her heart.

She had never known love could be like this. She had thought she understood it: the love of a husband, a friend, a mother long dead. But this was something else entirely. This was a love that had no beginning, that seemed to have been waiting in her bones since before she was born, a vast tide of tenderness that rose up out of nowhere and poured through her, flooding every dark and frightened corner, until she was weeping and laughing and could not tell the one from the other.

«Hello,» she whispered. «Hello, my love. Hello, hello.»

And Margaret, at the foot of the bed, in the grey light of the dawning snow, covered her face with her hands, and her shoulders shook.

«What shall we call her?» she asked, a long while later, when she could speak.

Nora raised her eyes. Beyond the window, the first thin light was spreading across the harbour, turning the whole white world to pearl and rose and gold. The storm had passed. The sea lay flat and shining. On the far hill, a single cottage chimney sent up

a thin straight thread of smoke.

«Eliza,» she said. «Eliza Margaret.»

Margaret did not say anything.

She stood there a long moment with her hand pressed to her mouth and her eyes closed, and her whole body trembled, and when at last she looked up, her face was wet, and radiant, and very young.

«Eliza Margaret Hartley,» she said softly. «Well. That's a good strong name.»

Chapter Nine: Possession

Happiness, it turns out, is the most dangerous thing you can give to a frightened person.

In the first week after Eliza's birth, Hartley House glowed. The roads were cleared on the third day, and a bewildered young midwife arrived by Land Rover to find mother and child thriving, and the grandmother (she was not yet called that, but already she acted it) bustling round the kitchen in a pinafore, humming a Scottish hymn under her breath. The doctor came and pronounced it a miracle. The whole village sent cards, and flowers, and casseroles, and enormous knitted blankets in violent shades of yellow, and Mrs. Pickering, whom Nora would have sworn on her life had never given a thing away that she could sell, arrived on the doorstep with a jar of homemade damson jam and a look of sheepish curiosity.

Daniel telephoned on the Sunday. The line was clear for once. His voice came through unusually warm, deep and shaken, and for a full minute he could not speak, only breathe, and Nora held the receiver to her ear in the dim hall, with Eliza asleep against her shoulder, and listened to her husband weep, ten thousand miles away, in the heat of a desert she had never seen.

«Is she, is she all right?»

«She's perfect. She's got your chin.»

«God. Oh, God. Nora, I wish I — »

«I know.»

«I should have been there.»

«Your mother was there,» said Nora, and her voice softened. «She was wonderful. I don't know what I'd have done without her.»

There was a long pause on the line, crackling with static. «Really?» said Daniel, in a small, hopeful voice. «You two, you got on?»

Nora looked across the hall. Through the open kitchen door she could see Margaret, pink-faced and shining, stirring a pot of milk with her back to them, her shoulders shaking with some silent laughter that had been building all afternoon. She thought of the ledger, the loan, the dirty trick on Roland Sykes, the three-hundred-pound hole in the takings, the eleven pages of notes under her mattress. She thought, *If I tell him, he will come home.* She thought, *If he comes home, he will be court-martialled and we shall lose everything.*

«We got on,» she said, and closed her eyes. «Like a house on fire.»

The trouble began on the eighth day, and it began with love.

Nora noticed it first as a small thing. Eliza would cry in the night, and Nora would wake, groggy and aching, to find the cradle already empty and the sound of Margaret's low voice drifting up the stairs: *Hush now, hush, my wee lamb.* She would go down in her dressing gown and find the old woman in Walter's

armchair by the banked range, with the baby tucked into the crook of her arm and her cheek resting on the soft dark head, her eyes closed, rocking, with an expression of such helpless, absorbed devotion that Nora did not have the heart to speak.

Then it was every night. Then it was every feed. Then it was every waking moment.

«I can take her,» Nora would say, holding out her arms.

«You need your rest.»

«I've rested. She's hungry.»

«She's *just* settled.» And Margaret would turn her shoulder, ever so slightly, and fold the baby closer, and something would flash in her pale eyes: something wary, and fierce, and frightened. «A baby should not be passed about like a parcel. It unsettles them.»

On the tenth day Nora came back from a bath to find the nursery rearranged. The cradle had been moved from beside her bed to the room across the landing, Margaret's room, and the door was closed. Behind it, softly, a voice was singing.

«She sleeps better in here,» said Margaret, when Nora knocked. «There's no draught from the window.»

«She sleeps in *my* room.»

«She'll sleep in a warm one.»

«Margaret.» It was the first time Nora had used her Christian name, and it came out with an edge that shocked them both. «Give me my daughter.»

The door opened. Margaret stood in the gap, with Eliza in her

arms and a look of such naked, appalled panic that Nora's anger died in her throat.

She understood, in a flash, what was happening. The old woman was not trying to steal the child. She was not being cruel, or controlling, or malicious. She was simply terrified. She had lost three babies. She had lost a husband. She had lost the only life she had ever known, and here, in her arms, warm and breathing and smelling of milk, was the one thing the universe had given her back, and she could not bear to let go of it, even for an hour, because everything she had ever loved had been taken away the moment she looked aside.

«Oh, Margaret,» said Nora, and her eyes filled. «I'm not going to take her away.»

«You will,» said Margaret, hoarse. «Everyone does. You'll take her to Boston, or Leeds, or somewhere, and I'll see her at Christmas. I know how it goes.»

«I'm not — »

«You will. And you'll be right to. I'd go, in your place.» She was crying openly now, not noisily, but with a dreadful dignity, the tears running down the deep lines of her face and dripping off her chin on to the baby's blanket. «I'm a hard old woman, Nora, and I know it. I'm not good with people. I never learned. And I look at her, and I think: *what if I get it wrong? What if I frighten her away, too?*

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