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*The House at the End
of Hope Street*

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Chapter One

The house has stood at the end of Hope Street for nearly two hundred years. It's larger than all the others, with turrets and chimneys rising high into the sky. The front garden grows wild, the long grasses scattered with cowslips, reaching toward the low-hanging leaves of the willow trees. At night the house looks like a Victorian orphanage housing a hundred despairing souls, but when the clouds part and it is lit by moonlight, the house appears enchanted. As if Rapunzel lives in the tower and a hundred Sleeping Beauties lie in the beds.

The house is built in red brick, the colour of rust, and of Alba Ashby's coat – a rare splash of brightness in a wardrobe of black. Alba doesn't know what she's doing, standing on the doorstep, staring at the number eleven nailed to the silver door. She's lived in Cambridge for four of her nineteen years, but has never been down this street before. And there is no reason for her to be here now, except that she has nowhere else to go.

In the silence Alba's thoughts, the ones she's been trying to escape on her midnight walks through town, begin to circle, gathering, ready to whip themselves into a hurricane. *How did this happen? How could this happen to me?* She's always been so careful,

never inviting any drama or disaster, living like a very sensible seventy-nine-year-old: in a tiny box with a tight lid.

And while most people wouldn't achieve much under such strict limitations, Alba achieved more than most: five A-levels at fifteen, a place at King's College, Cambridge, to read Modern History, and full PhD funding at eighteen. All this by virtue of two extraordinary traits: her intelligence and her sight. At age four and a half, as well as being able to name and date all the kings and queens of England, Alba started to realise she could see things other people couldn't: the ghost of her grandma at the breakfast table, the paw prints of long-disappeared cats in the grass, the aura of her mother moments before she entered a room. Alba could see smells drifting toward her before she smelt them and sounds vibrating in the air minutes before she heard them. So, because Alba knew things other people didn't, they never noticed she lived her life in a box.

But ever since the worst event of Alba's life, she's barely been able to see anything at all, constantly tripping over pavement edges, falling down steps, and walking into walls. She still hasn't cried because to stay in shock feels safer, it keeps a distance between her and the thing she's trying to pretend hasn't happened. The numbness surrounds her, a buffer against the outside world, through which Alba can hardly breathe or see.

Today is the first of May, just after midnight. The moon is full and bright. Vines of wisteria and jasmine twist together across the red bricks, their flowers hanging over the windows and above the door. Their scent puffs through the air and, though she's sorry she can't see their colours, the smell begins to fill Alba with a sense of calm she's never felt before. Her shoulders soften as she reaches up to touch the flowers hanging in wispy bunches above her head. Soon

she'll feel strong enough to walk again. But then she remembers, she no longer has anywhere to go.

In the silence Alba hears a low hum in the air, almost indistinguishable from the breeze. Still cupping the flowers in her palm, she listens. The hum grows louder and becomes a tune, the notes drifting toward her, and suddenly Alba is captivated. She knows the words to this song:

Sleep, sleep my sweet

Sleep and dream of butterflies . . .

The next line slips away as Alba thinks of the summer her mother sang that song, when she was eight years old, just before her father left. The tune grows louder, seeping through Alba's skin, sending shivers down her spine. She knows she should be scared, but she's not; she's captivated.

Alba steps back to look up at the house, at its rows of dark windows, the panes of glass glinting. For a second Alba thinks she sees a face, a flash of white and blonde that disappears so the night is mirrored back at her. She notices a plant with flowers so purple they're almost black. Its strangeness beckons Alba to come closer, rub its leaves, smell its flowers, slide her fingers into the earth . . . The charms of the house and its garden sink deeper into Alba and, without realising what she's doing, she steps forward and rings the bell.

As Peggy Abbot scurries down the steps, pulling on her patchwork dressing gown, a picture of Alba starts to take shape in her mind: tiny and built like a boy, spiky black hair, intense blue eyes, a mouth that rarely smiles, a weight of sadness and self-doubt heavier than Peggy has ever felt before, but a sense of sight stronger even than her own. Suddenly she knows that this might be a dangerous thing indeed. The midnight glory is in bloom tonight.

If Alba looks for too long she might see what makes its petals glow and, worst of all, sense what's buried beneath it.

Wishing she were forty years younger, Peggy hurries along the hallway, slipping on the wood in her woollen socks.

When the door swings open, Alba steps back in shock, staring into the face of the oldest and most beautiful woman she's ever seen.

The moment Alba steps into the house, she knows it's different from any home she's ever known. It is, quite clearly, alive. The walls breathe, gently rising and falling beside Alba as she follows the old woman down the hall. The stripped oak floorboards soften under her feet in welcome, the light bulbs and lampshades pull at the ceiling to get a closer look.

As she walks Alba gazes at the walls, weighted down by hundreds of framed photographs: black-and-white pictures of different women, in group shots and singles, wearing trouser suits and top hats, flapper dresses and flat caps, ribbons and pearls. Among the photographs are pictures, pencil drawings and silhouettes, and a few miniature oil paintings of powder-puffed female faces with curls piled high on their heads.

'Wait.' Alba almost stumbles into the wall. 'That's Florence Nightingale.'

'Oh yes,' Peggy says. 'She stayed with us for a spell before she went off to the Crimea. When my great-, great-, great-aunt Grace Abbot ran the house. A lovely girl by all accounts, Flo, though rather strong willed and a little too fond of sailors . . .' Peggy smiles.

'Gosh, really?' Alba whispers. 'That's . . . gosh.'

As Peggy ushers her into the kitchen Alba feels a flash of fear. She ought to think twice before entering the homes of complete

strangers. Hidden under the folds of Peggy's patchwork dressing gown could beat the heart of an evil witch who sees Alba as a modern-day Gretel. But when Alba enters the kitchen she's enveloped in the scent of something magical: cinnamon, ginger, lavender and several spices she can't possibly name, and her fears evaporate. She feels three years old again, transported to a wished-for childhood of baking biscuits with her mother on Sunday afternoons. If Peggy is bewitching her, then the spell is complete.

A few minutes later Alba sits at one end of a long oak table, watching Peggy search for a saucepan. The old woman is bent over, clattering around in the wooden cupboards, muttering swear words as she flings unwanted pans aside. Alba begins to wonder just how old Peggy is. With her white hair and papery skin, slight stoop and frail limbs, she might be anything from seventy to a hundred and seven. But her movements are quick and light and her voice doesn't carry any quiver or depth from age.

Peggy stands, brandishing a saucepan. 'Do you like hot chocolate, dear?' she asks. 'I don't think tea will do, we need something more fortifying on such an auspicious occasion. Hot chocolate with fresh cream, that's the thing.'

Alba nods, still captivated by the kitchen's smells, still shocked by the turn her night has taken, not really registering Peggy's words. While the old woman pours a pint of milk into the saucepan, Alba glances around the kitchen. It's vast, the length of a long garden, with creamy yellow walls that reach up to meet black oak beams running across the arched ceiling. As in the hall, every inch of the kitchen is covered with rows and rows of photographs. Alba gazes at them, wondering who they are and why they are decorating the old woman's walls.

'They've all lived here, at one time or another.' Still stirring the

milk at the stove, Peggy speaks without turning around. ‘They came to the house, just like you, when they’d run out of hope.’

Alba frowns at the back of Peggy’s patchwork dressing gown, at the wild white hair reaching down to her waist, wondering how on the old woman knew what she was thinking.

‘They left to lead wonderful lives or, in some cases, afterlives.’ Peggy chuckles. ‘The old residents can inspire you, if you let them. One in particular, actually.’

‘Oh?’ Alba asks, only half listening. In a frame just above the kitchen sink she sees an oil painting of a woman with blonde hair twisted into knots at the sides of her head. Alba squints for a better look. ‘But, that’s—’

‘Yes.’ Peggy doesn’t turn to look. ‘She stayed here in 1859, suffering from a severe bout of writer’s block. She started writing *Middlemarch* in this very kitchen.’

‘No,’ Alba gasps, ‘really?’

‘Oh yes. Half the history of England would be quite different if this house had never been built, believe me.’

And although she can’t explain why, Alba does. She already feels closer to this woman than to her own family. Peggy stops stirring, steps over to the fridge, tugs open the door, sticks her head inside and takes out a china bowl. ‘This cream is the real stuff,’ she says, and smiles. ‘I whipped it up myself. I can’t countenance that synthetic crap one squirts from a bottle, can you?’

‘No.’ Alba agrees, amused to hear such a sweet old lady swear.

‘I’m glad to hear it.’ Peggy sets the bowl down on the marble counter next to the stove. ‘I can’t trust anyone who won’t take real cream, or real sugar. Those’ – Peggy searches for the word and shudders – ‘sweeteners, such a *seemingly* sweet, really are beyond the pale, don’t you think?’

Alba watches Peggy stirring cocoa into the milk. Suddenly she never wants to leave. She wants to sit in this kitchen, surrounded by the smell of spices, forever. Alba slips off her coat. ‘Why did you invite me in?’ she asks. ‘It was very kind, but I don’t see . . .’

‘You don’t?’ Peggy smiles. ‘Because I think you see an awful lot more than most people.’ She sets two giant mugs down on the table. ‘Don’t you?’

‘Thank you.’ Alba glances at her cup. It’s the first time in her life that anyone has ever guessed who she is and what she can do. ‘Yes,’ she admits softly, ‘I suppose so, though not since . . .’

Peggy takes a sip of hot chocolate. ‘Since what, my dear?’

Alba looks up. How can she possibly explain the devastating events of the last few days? Her head is so full of fury, her heart so steeped in sadness, that she can hardly make sense of anything anymore. All Alba knows is that she wants to undo time, run backward through the last seven months, unravel everything and begin again: finish her MPhil, write a groundbreaking thesis, publish papers, until she’s at the forefront of the next generation of great historical minds. And if she can’t achieve that, something truly brilliant, then what’s the point in living at all? Because in her family, being mediocre, ordinary, run-of-the-mill, simply isn’t allowed.

As though Alba had just spoken her thoughts aloud, Peggy smiles sympathetically. ‘You know, in my long and extensive experience, what we want isn’t always what will make us happiest,’ she says. ‘But we’ll come back to that. First, tell me what brought you to my doorstep. Start from the beginning, and don’t leave anything out.’ Peggy sits back in her chair, smoothing her patchwork dressing gown across her lap, hugging her mug of hot chocolate to her chest. This is her favourite part. After more than a thousand stories in sixty-one years, she never fails to get excited at the prospect of a new one.

‘Well . . .’ Alba stalls. ‘I don’t . . . I mean, I was just walking around town, not going anywhere, and then . . . and then I just found myself here.’ Nervous, she scratches the back of her neck, tugging at short spikes of black hair, hoping she doesn’t look as messy as usual, then realising she probably looks even worse. ‘I didn’t mean to knock on your door, it just sort of . . . happened.’

‘Take a sip of chocolate,’ Peggy suggests. ‘It’ll help to clear your head.’

As the warmth slips down her throat and into her belly, Alba starts to feel soft and snug, as if the kitchen has just hugged her. And, after a few minutes she isn’t scared to tell the truth any more. At least a little bit of the truth. But, where should she begin? History. Love. Trust. Betrayal. Heartbreak. Alba shifts the words around in her head, wondering what to hide and what to reveal.

By the time the last of the hot chocolate has gone, Alba has told Peggy about failing her MPhil and ending her career. However, she has carefully, deliberately omitted the single most important piece of information, the thing that slots it all together.

‘I can’t stay in college any longer, and I can’t go home,’ Alba says, though she stops short of explaining why. ‘So I was wandering the streets in the middle of the night.’

In the ensuing silence, the spices circle the kitchen, even stronger than before, and although Alba can’t see the smells, she can hear the hum of her mother’s song again in the back of her head. It rocks her like a lullaby.

‘You can stay here,’ Peggy says, ‘for ninety-nine nights, until the seventh of August, just before midnight. And then you must go.’

‘Sorry?’ Alba wonders if the hot chocolate was spiked with rum because she’s suddenly light-headed. ‘But I couldn’t possibly . . .’

‘No rent, no bills. Your room will be your own, to do with as you

like.' She smiles, and Alba can almost hear the old woman's papery skin crinkle. 'But take care of the house, and it'll take care of you.'

'Well, I . . .' A thousand questions crowd Alba's mind, so she asks the first one that comes to her lips. 'But why ninety-nine nights?'

'Ah, yes,' Peggy says. 'Well, because it's long enough to help you turn your life around and short enough so you can't put it off forever.'

'Oh,' Alba says, thinking it'll be impossible to pick up the pieces of her shattered life in such a tiny amount of time, let alone get everything back on track.

'Oh, it is possible,' Peggy says. 'I can promise you that. And you won't have to do it alone. That's the point of being here. The house will help you. It's all yours, except for the tower, which is only mine. And you can never go there. That's my one rule. Do you understand?'

When Alba nods, it's clear to them both that she's staying, even though she hasn't yet said yes. But how can she say no? A secret tower. How deliciously intriguing. It reminds her of another fairy tale. When Alba first saw the house she thought of Rapunzel, then Sleeping Beauty and now Bluebeard. Alba smiles. She loves fairy tales.

'If you stay I can promise you this,' Peggy says. 'This house may not give you what you want, but it will give you what you need. And the event that brought you here, the thing you think is the worst thing could have happened? When you leave, you'll realise it was the very best thing of all.'

After showing a sedated, sleepy Alba to her bedroom, Peggy shuffles along the corridor toward the tower, creaks up her own stairs and hurries into her kitchen to find a pile of glittering presents and

a cake. An enormous, three-tiered extravaganza, iced with thick white chocolate cream, decorated with sugar flowers and scattered with fresh ones: red and yellow roses, wisteria, sunflowers, bluebells and buttercups. Just as Peggy knew it would be, just as it has been every year for as long as she's lived in the house. Along with the cake, the kitchen is decorated with a rainbow of balloons, streamers and a banner emblazoned with the words

HAPPY 82ND, PEG!

Still catching her breath, Peggy glances up at the clock and smiles.

'Eighty-two years, two hours and twenty-nine minutes old.' She eases herself into the little sky blue chair at the wooden table in front of her cake. After blowing out the candles and cutting herself an extremely large slice, Peggy slowly, methodically begins to devour the first tier and very soon, icing is smeared around her mouth and all over her fingers.

'Delicious.' She grins, displaying a mouthful of cake. 'Even better than my eighty-first. I must say, you outdo yourself every year.' Peggy looks up and the ceiling lights flicker in appreciation of the compliment.

Peggy's kitchen is smaller and prettier than the one downstairs. The furniture is made of beech and painted white, excepting the blue chair. Vases, pots and jam jars sit on every surface, filled with flowers that alter according to Peggy's moods but never wilt or die. The cupboards have glass doors to display a collection of crockery: bone china cups covered with tarot cards that read the future of whoever drinks from them, teapots and plates painted with characters from *Alice in Wonderland*, 'Cinderella', *Don Giovanni*, 'The Frog Prince',

'The Lady of Shalott' and 'The Flower Queen's Daughter'. The characters shift around at night, indulging in various games and love affairs. They are Peggy's own celebrity magazines and, when she shuffles in for her first cup of tea every morning, she's always curious to see who's fallen in love and who's split up overnight. Now, on the teapot, Rumpelstiltskin is slipping off Guinevere's blouse while, on her plate and almost hidden by the remains of a third slice of cake, the Mad Hatter is kissing an Ugly Sister. The Star – the tarot card that always appears on her birthday – shines from her teacup.

Peggy celebrates her birthday twice. First, just after midnight, always alone. Then in the morning, with whoever is residing in the house. Peggy never knows how many guests she'll have, sometimes as many as twelve. Today, with the arrival of Alba, she'll have just three: a rare island of calm and tranquillity in a sea of usual confusion and chaos. Though, sadly, Peggy knows the relative peace won't last. She can already sense several women whose hope is almost extinguished, who'll be turning up on her doorstep before too long.

The house always joins in the birthday festivities, creaking its beams and rattling its pipes because it's celebrating too. The house was completed, its last brick laid, on the first of May 1811, and every Abbot woman who has inherited the house since has been born on its anniversary. The house was a gift from the prince regent to his lover Grace Abbot. And when the prince moved on to his next mistress, Grace opened the house to women who needed it. Slowly they came, drawn by their own sixth sense, staying for their ninety-nine nights, and, with a few tragic exceptions, leaving with their spirits high and their hearts healed.

Peggy sips her tea. The tarot card on her cup has changed. Death

looks up at her now: the card of beginnings and endings, sudden shifts and dramatic transformations. She puts down her cup.

And on the table is a note:

Congratulations on your 82nd and final birthday. You have been a beautiful landlady. One of the very best. We thank you for your service. Now it is time to find your successor. Then you will be free from this life and can move on to the next.

Peggy has to read the note nearly a dozen times before she can believe it. She knew she couldn't live forever, but the shock has still left her a little shaken. If she were another sort of woman she might be scared, she might cry and wish for more time. She might look back on her life and be filled with regrets. But Peggy won't. She is made of stronger stuff. She's also in the rather unique position of being very well acquainted with a great many departed souls and knows that death is nothing to fear. It's merely an adjustment in living conditions. In fact, if it wasn't for Harry, she wouldn't mind at all.

Peggy holds the cup to her lips, thinking of him, and wondering just how many days of life she has left.