

THE HOUSE AT ELDER FERRY

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CHAPTER ONE

The tide had been pulling out all morning, leaving ribbons of seaweed and the split armor of mollusks glinting in the sun. I arrived just as the ferry road turned to gravel, the heat clinging low to the earth like breath on a mirror. The town was Elder, and the house that was next to the inn, as I would come to know, was simply 'Mazelle's'.

There are certain homes that never settle into the land. They hover above it: too white, too vast, too sure of themselves. Mazelle's was like that: set back from the coast, crouched in a copse of live oaks, wrapped in porches that leaned in slightly as though listening. It was not new. In fact, it had once been a boarding school for girls whose families could no longer "keep them at home". Even from the outside, it carried the air of inheritance, as though its very frame remembered other lives. What waited inside, though, belonged only to her.

I hadn't come to Elder for Mazelle. I didn't know her name when I arrived. I'd come south from Boston, where everything had gone a little too cold and a little too clean. I was writing again. Profiles of places for glossy magazines, pieces meant to sell yearning disguised as travel, and I needed something green and strange to shake the winter off. The south would have that, surely.

Elder had been recommended by a woman I had once wanted to love but couldn't afford to need. I didn't know which I wanted.

The inn was run by a widow who dressed in linen and offered no name nor judgment. I half-expected her to see straight through me. To note the burnout, the failed relationship, the aimless drift that had brought me down to Elder Ferry in the first place. But she only handed me the key. My bungalow was separate from the main, transient part of the inn, standing with five companions, each the same weathered style; it smelled faintly of honeysuckle and Clorox. There was a fan that spun slowly enough to be ornamental. I didn't mind. I slept deeply.

In the mornings I walked to the water, then inland past the church, the school, the shuttered post office with its flaking federal eagle. Elder had been a shipping town once, then a paper mill town, then nothing much at all. Now it was trying to be charming. There was a bookstore that sold candles and old maps. A coffee shop with grapefruit soda and gluten-free banana bread. Beans from exotic places in South America, the owners boasting a relationship from the farmers to roasters. It was the sort of reinvention that looked quaint on the surface but carried its own kind of haunt. The ghosts here wore perfume and were mostly quiet.

I first saw her on the second Tuesday. She was driving a vintage silver Jaguar with the windows down and music on. Something orchestral and cinematic. She passed me slowly, one hand on the wheel, the other holding a white linen sunhat like a question. Her face wasn't forgettable, but it was the kind people remember incorrectly: softer, more mysterious, blurred at the edges by sunlight and wishful thinking. She looked as though she were in her early thirties, though strangers might have placed her in her twenties, misled by the youth in her skin and the careless grace of her movements. She didn't look at me. That would come later.

The waitress at the café told me, without being asked, 'That's Mazelle Sinclair'.

She said the name as if it required no explanation, like 'summer' or 'war'.

People said she'd bought the house five years earlier but only started living in it full-time after the pandemic. She came and went. Sometimes she was gone for months, other times she hosted art students, sommeliers, even a group of former ballet dancers once. You would see the piazza lights flicker back to life and know she was home again. There would be music, and boats docked overnight, and men who looked like they were born knowing how to wear seersucker.

She was rumored to be from Savannah. Or maybe the outer islands. Others said she was a mixed breed from New Orleans with a direct link to Marseille. Her accent held both possibilities, depending on how much she'd had to drink. Some said she had inherited her money; others said she'd built a gallery in Paris that sold nothing and made millions. One man swore he saw her once on a yacht in Antibes with a Lebanese prince. Another said she had a daughter who lived in New Zealand. No one agreed on anything but this: Mazelle Sinclair made space for you in her attention, just long enough for it to feel permanent, and then she left, without explanation.

I didn't meet her until the end of May.

The air had turned heavy, buzzing with cicadas, and the marsh grasses were high and tangled. I was in the bookstore trying to decide between a novel I had already read and a biography of a woman I had never heard of, when someone behind me said, 'That one's dull after the first affair'.

I turned, and there she was. No hat this time. Her hair was darker than I remembered, a honey blonde, hanging loose around her shoulders. She wore a cream-colored blouse with tiny pearl

buttons and no jewelry except a stainless steel Tank Française, which caught the afternoon glare like it had somewhere to be.

I laughed, more out of surprise than anything else.

'Which one?' I asked.

She touched the cover of the biography. 'She dies too slowly,' she said, and walked out without buying a book.

After that, she was everywhere. Not in the way that locals are, predictable and tethered, but in that particular orbit of the highly desired: glimpsed in passing, invoked in anecdotes, always half-vanished. She sat at the far end of the dock one morning, barefoot and holding a cigarette she didn't light. She swam in the ocean alone, breaststroke slow, hair pinned in a knot like a ballerina. She stopped by the bookstore again but left with only a bottle of rose geranium oil.

By June, the air had begun to shift, the kind of settling humidity that clung to skin and thickened every breath. Everything bloomed more aggressively, as if aware that spring would soon take its leave. The paper mill's old dock creaked back to life with yachts and charter boats. There was talk of a midsummer party, Mazelle's, of course, and though no one said who was going, everyone seemed to be preparing. Tailors were suddenly booked. A florist came in from Charleston. Caterers began rehearsing menus in whispers.

I could feel the anticipation rising, as palpable as the changed summer air itself, an almost electric hum that seemed to slip under doors and linger in shopfront windows. I told myself I didn't care, that I could watch the spectacle from a distance, but the truth was I wanted to be

there, wanted to see the house thrown open, the rooms spilling with people. I wanted, more than I cared to admit, to find a way inside.

Eventually, I asked the waitress how people got invited to her party.

'She invites you,' she said. 'Or she doesn't. It's not that complicated.'

But for me, it was. I was determined to snag an invitation. One way or another.