

A Wisteria Bay Cozy Mystery

# RAILROADED INTO MURDER



FIONA LARKSPUR

# *Railroaded into Murder*

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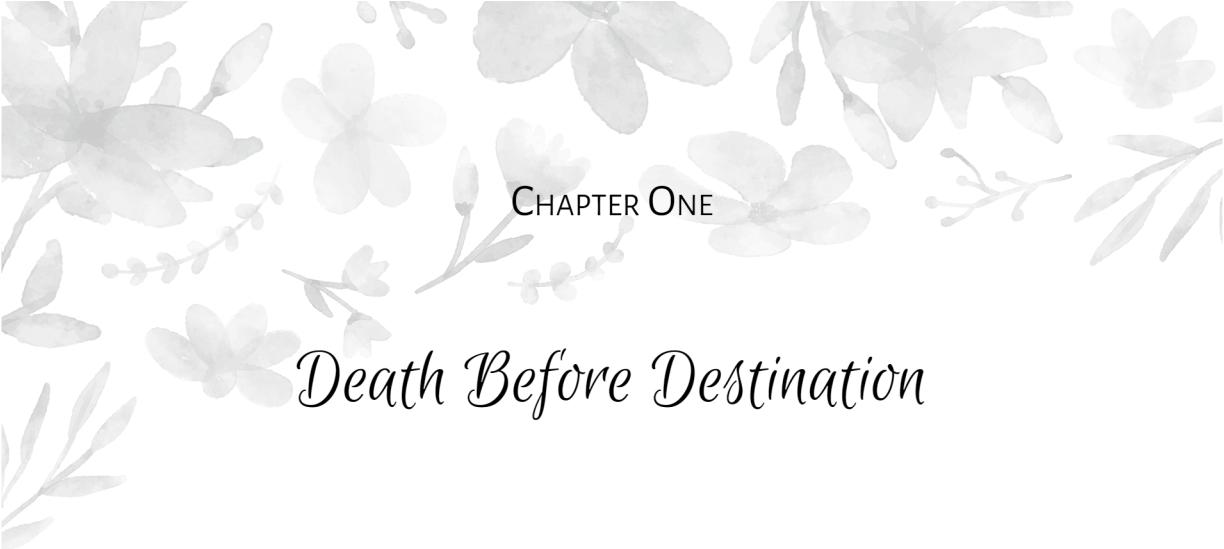
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## CHAPTER ONE

# *Death Before Destination*

The train's whistle screamed through the cliffs like a warning no one heard. Marigold Thorne stood just outside what she thought was her sleeper compartment, clutching a wrinkled ticket in one hand and a very enthusiastic golden retriever's leash in the other.

"Well, this is it, Biscuit," she murmured, peering through the frosted glass. "Coastal Line 77 to Wisteria Bay, home of my mysterious inheritance, and hopefully not motion sickness."

Biscuit gave a soft woof and nosed her shin in agreement, his ears perked and tail thumping against the narrow corridor wall. He looked more ready for a beach day than a cramped train ride. Around them, passengers shuffled into compartments, the scent of leather suitcases, industrial soap, and sea air trailing through the corridor windows.

Mari jiggled the handle, but it didn't budge – the door was locked. She frowned. She was pretty sure this was Compartment C. "Of course," came a voice behind her, "only you would get lost in a straight line."

Tilly Bloom appeared, breathless and grinning, one hand balancing a paper cup of tea and the other dragging her bright, floral luggage.

"I took a wrong turn at a fake potted plant," Mari muttered. "And this door's locked."

"Maybe the ghost of Great-Granny Thorne is already making house rules," Tilly said with a theatrical shiver. "Or maybe you just can't count."

Mari gestured toward the frosted window. "Someone's in there. And not moving."

Tilly's playful smile faded. She stepped closer and squinted.

Through the distorted glass, the silhouette of a woman sat stiffly upright. Unmoving. Unblinking.

Biscuit whined.

Mari knocked. "Excuse me? I think I may have the wrong compartment."

Silence.

She knocked harder. "Hello?"

Still nothing.

"Something's wrong," Mari said.

"I'll go find someone," Tilly said quickly, already jogging down the corridor with her tea still in hand.

Minutes later, Tilly returned with Nadine, the flustered train attendant, who fumbled with the key and pushed the door open with shaking hands.

The compartment smelled of lavender and money – a delicate blend that clung to the air like a false promise. Mari breathed it in and felt a chill skitter down her spine, the sweetness of the scent too perfect, too rehearsed, like perfume dabbed on a porcelain doll. There was something so precise about the space: not a wrinkle in the blanket, not a single hair out of place. A half-drunk cup of tea sat perfectly on a tray, still faintly warm when Mari

touched the side of the porcelain. Too warm to be forgotten by someone already gone cold.

The elderly lady sat upright in the center of it all, her cream wool coat immaculate, a pearl necklace perfectly positioned at her throat. Her eyes – open, unblinking – stared forward without fear or tension. Almost serene.

But Mari's stomach twisted.

“She's not breathing,” she said. Her voice came out flatter than she expected.

Nadine gasped and turned away. Tilly clutched Mari's elbow. Even Biscuit backed away with a low whimper.

Mari stepped closer. Something wasn't right.

The positioning was too perfect. Too posed. Her gloved hands were delicately folded in her lap, but one glove wasn't aligned with the other. One thumb curled unnaturally beneath the palm.

And then Mari caught it: a faint, acrid note that didn't belong in the lavender-rich air. Almonds? Bitter, chemical. It was gone almost as soon as she registered it.

Mari blinked and stepped back, heart hammering. No sign of a struggle. No spilled drink. No panic. But that scent... The positioning...

Her mind raced, pulling at half-remembered facts from every mystery novel she'd ever borrowed from the library. Poison. Quiet. Elegant. Mostly untraceable.

“I don't think she died of natural causes,” Mari whispered.

“What do we do?” Tilly whispered. “Wait for someone in a trench coat and gloves to declare it foul play?”

Mari stared at the woman, then at the rest of the room. There was no spilled drink. No sign of a struggle. Just... stillness.

“I think... I think that was Eloise Drake.”

“The one who left you the inn?”

Mari nodded slowly. “Looks like she left me a mystery too.”

Tilly’s grip on her arm tightened. “Maybe the train just wants to deliver drama today. Should we check if there’s a tarot card reader in the dining car?” Tilly could always be counted on to resort to humor when she was nervous or uncomfortable.

Word spread quickly. Within minutes, curious heads poked from compartments.

One young woman stood apart from the others, lingering in the shadow of her doorway. She clutched a crumpled handkerchief in one hand, but her eyes weren’t red from crying. Instead, they flitted nervously from the open compartment door to the faces around her, as if calculating what others might have seen. Mari caught her gaze for a second – wide, watchful – before the girl looked away, disappearing into her compartment again.

Mari frowned. Wasn’t that the one who’d introduced herself as Eloise’s niece? Odd way to mourn.

Mari watched each person carefully. No one seemed surprised, but rather, just inconvenienced.

“It’s like someone canceled brunch,” Tilly whispered. “I half expect them to order a cheese board.”

Nadine tried to gather the passengers back into their compartments, offering apologies and updates with a trembling voice. The conductor made a brief appearance. He was stern, efficient, and noncommittal.

“Everyone’s pretending nothing’s wrong,” Mari murmured. “But someone on this train killed her.”

Tilly's eyes scanned the hallway. "Maybe they think if they ignore it hard enough, the body will vanish. Like a bad dinner party."

Tilly nudged her. "So what now, Miss Marple?"

Mari blinked. "Now? I find out who."

"Of course you do," Tilly sighed. "I suppose asking for a calm, uneventful journey was too much?"

"You brought a murder mystery jigsaw puzzle in your luggage," Mari reminded her.

"For emergencies," Tilly said proudly. "Not for this."

The conductor's voice cracked over the loudspeaker: "Due to an onboard medical emergency, we will proceed directly to Banning's Cove where local authorities will meet us. Please remain in your compartments. You are not confined to your birth, but please stay in the car in which your birth is located. Each car has an area where snacks and restroom facilities are available."

Tilly arched a brow. "They're locking us in with the killer?"

Mari opened her notebook and clicked her pen.

"Apparently," she said. "But that also means they can't get out."

Biscuit wagged his tail. Tilly leaned in. "Oh no. You've got that look again."

"What look?"

"The one where you solve crimes like it's a Sudoku puzzle."

Mari smiled faintly. "If I don't ask the right questions, no one will."

She pulled her satchel into her lap and rummaged through it. Out came a mystery novel, a spare pen, tissues, and a battered Agatha Christie paperback. All her comforts for a quiet journey – before it had turned into a murder mystery.

But what she needed most now was her small, leather-bound travel journal.

Mari paused with it in her hands, the weight of the moment settling in. This wasn't just another train ride. Someone on board had committed murder, and she might be the only one willing to uncover the truth.

She flipped to a blank page and titled it:

**Suspect List – Train 77** Miles, tall and too charming, with a travel journal he kept glancing at like he was rehearsing a story. Tara, the young woman who claimed to be Eloise's niece – pale, quiet, and maybe just a little too calm. Bryce, a tweedy professor type, forever misplacing his glasses and muttering about coastal architecture.

Tilly peeked over her shoulder. "Don't forget that guy who pretended to sneeze just now. Suspicious. Too suspicious."

Mari chuckled. "Noted."

The train rocked forward into a tunnel. When they emerged, Mari was already scribbling, and Biscuit sat like a golden sphinx at her side.

"I say we start interrogating," Tilly whispered. "Subtly. Casually. With snacks."

"Snacks?"

"People talk more when they're full. It's science."

Mari laughed. "You're impossible."

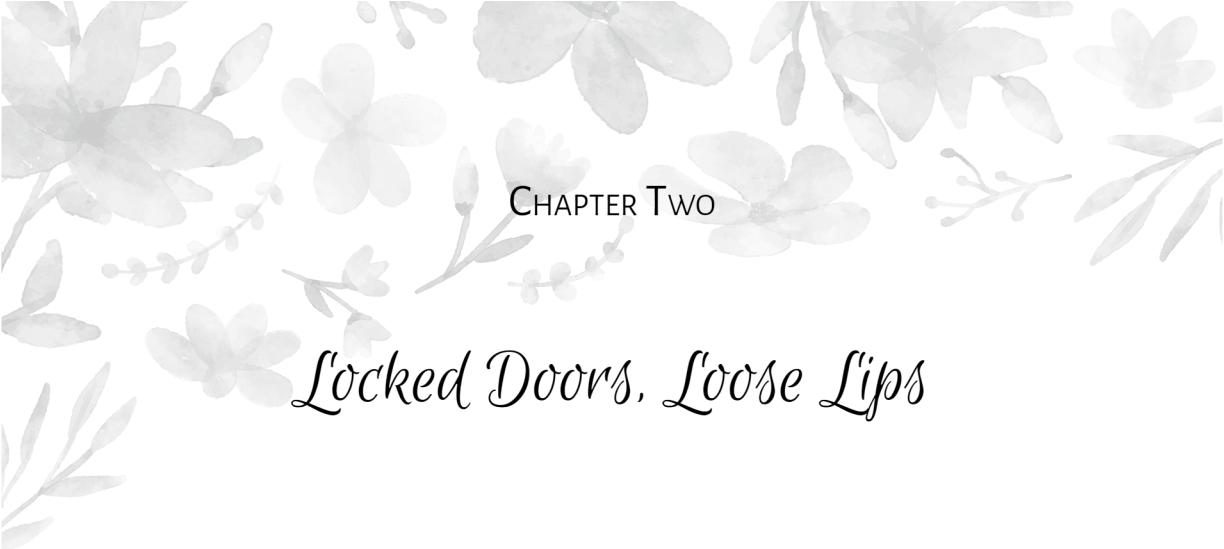
"And you're already profiling strangers and with prettier handwriting than most police reports."

She wasn't wrong. Mari's mind whirred, weaving motives and timelines together like threads on a detective's corkboard. She replayed the peculiar glances, the measured tones, the feigned indifference of passengers now cloaked in suspicion. Each moment, each gesture, took on new weight—as

if her years immersed in fiction had been a slow apprenticeship for this very moment, cataloging gestures, glances, and whispered words from the past few minutes.

They weren't just passengers now.

They were suspects.



## CHAPTER TWO

### *Locked Doors, Loose Lips*

The train had screeched to a jarring halt somewhere between civilization and nowhere. Outside the window, pine trees leaned like eavesdroppers, and fog rolled in like gossip. Mari perched tensely on the edge of the bench seat in their berth, her fingers drumming a restless rhythm against her notebook. The click-tap-click mirrored her racing thoughts, each beat echoing the unease twisting tighter in her chest.

Across from her, Tilly had unzipped a small bag of peanut butter crackers and offered one to Biscuit, who accepted it with royal solemnity.

“Nothing says luxury travel like being marooned on a train with a dead woman and a stale carb,” Tilly said brightly. “Five stars. Would die here again.”

Mari managed a soft snort but said nothing. Her stomach was still in knots from the discovery earlier. She hadn’t expected a dead body on her journey to a seaside inheritance – and certainly not one as famous and frosty as Eloise Drake.

The conductor’s voice came over the loudspeaker again, more static than man. “Due to the unfortunate circumstances, passengers are required to

remain in their births until local authorities arrive. Please only step out when necessary. Thank you for your cooperation.”

“Translation: We’re stuck. With snacks. And suspects,” Tilly muttered, stuffing another cracker into her mouth.

Mari didn’t respond. She was staring at her hastily scrawled notes: timelines, questions, scribbled arrows pointing at names: Miles. Tara. Bryce. Nadine.

“Something doesn’t add up,” she said.

“That’s your catchphrase,” Tilly replied. “That and ‘have you seen my bookmark.’”

Mari ignored her. Her mind had shifted into sleuth mode – categorizing behaviors, filing reactions, flipping mental tabs.

“Let’s walk,” Mari said. “We can pretend it’s just a stretch or to go to the dining area, but I want to see people’s faces.”

Tilly rose, brushing crumbs off her leggings. “Stretching and snooping. A Mari Thorne specialty.”

The corridor and sitting area outside buzzed with quiet tension. Tara sat in her birth, curtains open, with a tissue pressed to her nose, eyes red-rimmed but darting nervously. Bryce stood near a window, mumbling about train schedules and coastal fog patterns. Nadine passed them twice - once looking flustered, once looking oddly determined.

Mari took mental snapshots of every face. She lingered for a moment, watching the way Tara’s fingers trembled – not with grief, but with something more... calculated. Her gaze kept flitting to the corridor, not as if she was seeking comfort, but checking who might be watching her. The tears looked real, but something about her expression felt rehearsed.

Back in their own birth, Biscuit barked – low, alert – and tugged hard toward the corridor.

A shadow moved past their door. Biscuit whined, nose twitching.

Mari rose and slid the door open a crack. She peered out just in time to see Miles, hands shoved in his pockets, casually strolling past with all the guilt of a cat near a broken vase.

“He’s up to something,” she murmured.

“Or he’s just stretching his legs or going to get a bite to eat,” Tilly offered. “Unlike me, who will soon be fossilized into this seat. If I die on this train, I want you to promise to use a flattering picture in the obituary.”

Later that hour, the conductor, who did not look happy, walked through the corridor once again, clipboard in hand. Nadine trailed behind him like a worried shadow, offering passengers mints from a metal tin no one seemed to want.

Tilly quirked a brow and said, “Why does the conductor look like he just bit into a lemon made of bad news?”

Nadine whispered, “Well, he has come to realize everyone on the train knows someone died. Or at least they suspect it. You just can’t keep something like that quiet, no matter how hard you try.”

When Nadine reached Mari, her eyes flicked nervously to the side.

“Everything all right?” Mari asked.

“Yes. Of course,” Nadine said quickly. “We’re just doing a headcount. Routine. Just... protocol.”

Biscuit growled low in his throat.

Tilly leaned closer. “He only does that when he smells fake vanilla or fake people.”

Mari gave her friend a look.

“I’m just saying.”

After Nadine moved in a different direction from the conductor, Mari rose to follow. “I want to see what she’s really doing.”

Biscuit padded silently alongside Mari as they crept down the hallway. Mari stayed just far enough behind Nadine to observe without being seen. The train groaned around them, a mechanical protest echoing through its old bones.

As Nadine reached the luggage compartment, she looked around quickly – then opened the door and slipped inside.

Mari counted to five, then approached.

She heard a faint rustle. A zipper? A snap?

She knocked gently. No answer.

Then she opened the door a sliver. Inside, Nadine stood over a suitcase – her suitcase.

The tag with the blue floral ribbon was unmistakable.

“I was... checking the bags. For security,” Nadine stammered, nearly jumping out of her skin.

“Including mine?” Mari asked, cool and even.

“Just protocol,” Nadine repeated.

Biscuit darted into the cramped room and started growling at a duffel with the initials M. Townsend.

Nadine, looking very uncomfortable had Mari grab the dog’s collar and remove him from the room. Nadine backed up and shut the door firmly.

Mari stood frozen a moment, then turned and hurried back.

Back in the compartment, Mari was seething. She relayed the story to Tilly, who gasped dramatically.

“She touched your unmentionables! That’s a full-blown declaration of war - and not the fun, paintball kind. But seriously, what did she hope to find? Mari sat down and turned to the window, where fog now hugged the glass. The train was a cocoon of secrets.

“I think everyone’s hiding something,” she whispered.

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Biscuit, growing restless, pawed at the door again. Mari let him lead. He tugged her down the corridor toward the sitting and snack area, nose twitching.

Halfway there, a sudden voice stopped them.

“You know, not everyone appreciates your curiosity.”

Mari turned. Miles stood behind her, arms crossed, the lines around his mouth tight.

“I’m sorry?”

“You’ve been asking a lot of questions. It’s making people nervous.”

Mari held his gaze. “I thought we were supposed to stay in our compartments.”

Miles gave a tight smile. “Some rules were made to be broken.”

“Breaking the rules, huh? Are we talking jaywalking or jewelry heist?”

His smile dropped. “Careful, Miss Thorne. Curiosity isn’t always flattering.”

Back at their compartment, Mari’s mind was racing; why was Miles so agitated by her asking questions?

Biscuit went immediately to sniffing around the room.

Tilly looked up from a blanket she’d swaddled herself in like a human burrito.

“There you are. Why is Biscuit sniffing the corner of the room like it’s keeping secrets?”

Mari bent to see what had Biscuit so interested. It was a torn piece of envelope. The handwriting was elegant, the ink slightly smudged. Where had that come from?

Mari read aloud:

“Eloise Drake – inheritance dispute – Wisteria Bay legal—”

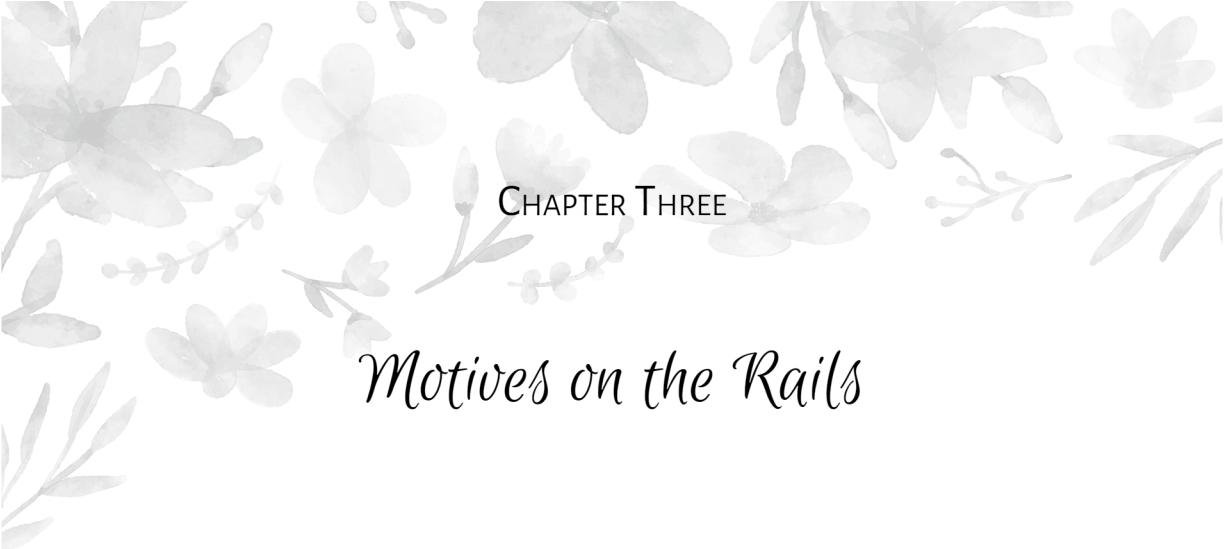
Tilly blinked. “Wow. She really was carrying legal baggage.”

Mari stared at the paper. “This wasn’t in my things earlier. How did it get under my bag?” Her eyes flicked to the door, remembering Tara’s earlier glance into their compartment. Had she passed by when Mari and Tilly were in the snack area? Was it possible Tara had slipped something in – too careless to destroy it, but sly enough to try planting doubt?

Tilly nodded slowly. “So someone planted it. Or dropped it. Either way...”

Mari exhaled. “The more we dig, the more it feels like Eloise’s death was orchestrated – not just tragic but calculated. Like someone went to great lengths to make it look ordinary.”

Outside, the fog thickened into a white curtain. Inside, the mystery was beginning to simmer.



## CHAPTER THREE

### *Motives on the Rails*

Mari stirred the lukewarm tea in her paper cup, watching the faint swirl of chamomile spiral like a whispered warning, as if the leaves held truths she wasn't ready to face. The soft spiral mirrored her unease, coiling tighter with each unanswered question. The train still hadn't moved, and the silence outside pressed heavily against the windows. But inside, the hum of nervous conversation had picked up again, each word a thread in a growing web.

Tilly sat across from her, poking at a blueberry muffin with the caution of a bomb technician. Biscuit snoozed under the table, his tail occasionally thumping against Mari's boots, a soothing motion that kept her grounded.

“We need more than scraps of paper and dog intuition,” Tilly muttered.

Mari nodded absently. “We need stories. Everyone’s got one – they just need the right questions.” Her thoughts flashed to Tara – the supposed niece who hadn’t seemed genuine and seemed more interested in staying invisible than grieving. Something about her story felt paper-thin.

She rose and stretched, then meandered down the aisle, cup in hand, adopting the casual air of a restless traveler. It wasn’t hard. Her nerves felt

like a humming wire just under her skin.

Mari's first stop was Bryce Dalton – the architecture professor who had introduced himself earlier that morning. He sat alone, scribbling in a leather journal, legs crossed with academic precision, spectacles perched low on his nose. He was scribbling in his leather journal, his legs crossed precisely, spectacles low on his nose. Mari angled her stance to appear harmless, curious, and maybe a little nosy.

“Busy morning,” she said lightly.

Bryce glanced up, smile taut. “More excitement than I’d hoped. And far more tragic.”

“You knew Ms. Drake, right? I heard you speaking to her before... everything.”

He hesitated, then nodded. “In passing, we had similar acquaintances. We spoke about Wisteria Bay. She mentioned she was headed there to... settle an affair.”

“Family business?”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “Not quite. She alluded to property. A home – possibly historic. But she was evasive. Guarded, even.”

Mari tucked that away, adding warmth to her smile. “Funny. She didn’t strike me as shy.”

“She wasn’t shy,” he said, voice a bit sharper. “She was evasive. There’s a difference.”

Mari nodded thoughtfully and continued on. As she passed a grandmotherly woman frowning at a crossword puzzle, she offered a gentle clue and a smile – just enough to ease in unnoticed. The small exchange gave her cover to glance around, eyes quietly assessing, ears tuned for whispers. Each stop was casual, each word deliberate, but beneath her calm

exterior, a sense of urgency pushed her forward like steam building behind a valve. a grandmotherly woman struggled with. Harmless chatter. Comfortable distractions. But now and then, she dropped Eloise's name like a pebble into water, watching the ripples.

Tara Bellamy had nothing to offer. She barely met Mari's gaze – her answers clipped, her tone overly rehearsed, as if she'd practiced what not to say. For someone claiming to be Eloise's niece, she seemed oddly detached. Miles, on the other hand, offered a whole wave and an overly dramatic sigh. "Have you ever seen a dead body before?" he asked. Mari didn't dignify that with a reply.

By the time she circled back to her seat, she had a dozen impressions and two solid notes: Bryce knew more than he said, and Miles was trying too hard.

Tilly raised an eyebrow. "Get anything juicy?"

Mari sipped her tea. "Not juicy. But maybe... tart."

She pulled out her notebook and flipped to a fresh page. It was time to start cross-referencing.

Everyone on this train had a destination – but someone had a motive. And Mari planned to find out who.

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Biscuit gave a soft yip in his sleep, his paws twitching as if chasing phantoms down shadowed tracks in a dream. Mari absently reached down and stroked his golden fur, her mind turning over Bryce's vague reference to Eloise's guardedness.

"She mentioned a historic home," Mari murmured, flipping back to a note she'd scribbled earlier. "But who would she be avoiding?"

Tilly leaned in, lowering her voice. “From the little I have heard, Eloise didn’t seem like someone who ran from things. More like the kind who would stare them down until they apologized.” Tilly grinned, “See I do pay attention, when I want to.”

Ignoring the last comment, Mari mused, “Unless what – or who – she was avoiding had the power to actually hurt her.”

Mari’s gaze swept the compartment again, lingering on the group of passengers. None of them looked particularly dangerous. But danger didn’t always look like a villain. Sometimes it looked like a friend you stopped trusting. Or a family member who suddenly remembered the value of an old will.

She rose again, her thoughts swirling like smoke as she crossed to the dining section, thankfully a real one, not just a snack bar. The polished brass fixtures and white-linen napkins felt strangely surreal in contrast to the tension that clung to the train like frost on glass. Mari steadied herself with a breath and walked toward Nadine, who was polishing already-clean silverware with the ferocity of someone trying to erase a memory. and not just a snack bar, and heading to where Nadine was polishing already-clean silverware with the ferocity of someone trying to erase a memory.

Mari slid onto the barstool at the counter. “Tough morning?”

Nadine flinched, then masked it with a tight smile. “Trying to stay busy. Helps with the nerves.”

Mari nodded sympathetically. “You worked the morning shift, right? Did you happen to see Ms. Drake before...”

“I served her tea,” Nadine said quickly. “She was polite. Quiet.” She hesitated, then added, “She didn’t want to be disturbed. Told me not to mention she was on board if anyone asked.”

Mari blinked. “Did someone?”

Nadine’s eyes flicked toward the rear of the car. “A man. I didn’t get a name. Late forties, dark blazer. He kept asking about passenger lists. I said I wasn’t allowed to share that.”

Mari’s pulse ticked upward. “Did Eloise seem scared?”

“She seemed... tired. Like she’d been running on empty a long time. But when I told her about the man, she asked to have her tea in her compartment and keep the door locked.”

Nadine busied herself rearranging silverware again, her movements stiff and jerky, the clink of metal betraying the tremble in her fingers. Her knuckles had gone pale, gripping a spoon as if it might anchor her to steadiness.

Mari rose slowly, heart pounding.

Eloise hadn’t just been traveling to Wisteria Bay. She’d been hiding from someone.

And now she was dead.

Someone on this train had been looking for her.

And Mari was going to find out who...and why.

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Mari returned to the passenger section of the car, her thoughts a whirlwind of questions and unfinished theories. Tilly arched a brow as she settled into the seat beside her.

“Well?”

“She was hiding,” Mari said, voice low. “From a man in a dark blazer who was asking about the passenger list.”

Tilly whistled softly. “Creepy.”

Before Mari could respond, Bryce Dalton stood and stretched, then wandered toward their table with his journal tucked beneath one arm. He gave a polite nod.

“Mind if I join you?”

Tilly gestured with a half-eaten muffin. “Public area. Be our guest.”

Bryce sat with stiff grace, folding his hands over the worn leather cover of his notebook. “I’ve been thinking about Ms. Drake.”

Mari leaned in. “Go on.”

He tapped a finger on his journal. “She mentioned Wisteria Bay, yes. But what she didn’t say aloud, I could read between the lines. She was traveling there to reclaim – a property she believed belonged to her family.”

Mari exchanged a glance with Tilly, her heartbeat ticking up like a second-hand skipping steps. She wet her lips before speaking. “You mean... inheritance?”

Bryce nodded. “Precisely. The estate was an old manor just outside town. I’ve done research on the area for an architectural history project. It’s been in legal limbo for years – disputes over rightful ownership. If Eloise was pursuing that, it means someone else may have been, too.”

Mari’s stomach tightened. “And if someone stood to lose that claim...”

“They’d have motive,” Bryce finished, his expression grave.

Tilly leaned forward. “You think someone killed her over a house?”

Bryce’s tone was mild, but his words held weight. “People have done worse for less. And from what little she said, it wasn’t just about property. It was about legacy. Family bloodlines. Old resentment.”

Mari felt her fingers itch for her notebook again. “Do you know who else might’ve wanted it?”

“I have guesses. But I’d hate to smear a name without proof.”

Mari studied him, noting the flicker of something unreadable behind his spectacles. Was it academic curiosity, or was it something more personal?

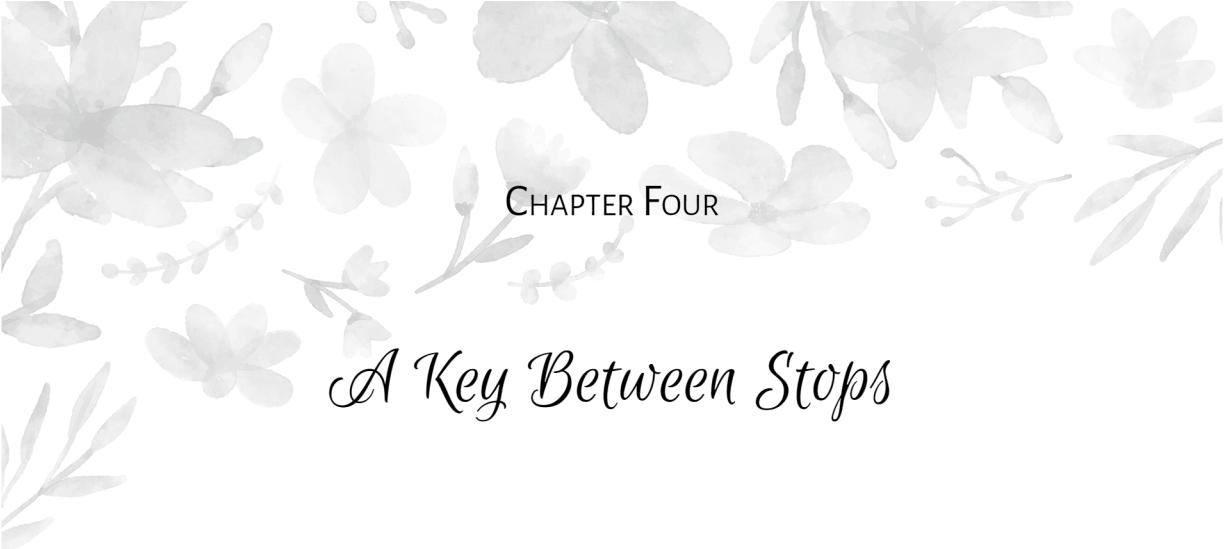
Bryce stood smoothly, excusing himself with a muttered promise to share more if he remembered anything else.

As he walked away, Tilly exhaled. “He’s definitely hiding something.”

Mari nodded slowly. “Yeah. But I don’t know if it’s guilt...or just knowledge.”

She glanced toward her bag, where the scrap of envelope sat hidden in her notebook. The phrase inheritance dispute echoed louder now.

And the stakes were starting to feel even higher than she’d thought – because if Eloise had been killed over a crumbling estate, then Mari, the surprise heir to that very property, might be next in line for more than just an inheritance.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### *A Key Between Stops*

Mari's thoughts were still tangled around Bryce's cryptic warnings and information when Biscuit suddenly lifted his head, ears pricking. He gave a low whine, then stood, nose twitching.

"What is it, boy?" Mari asked, watching as he padded away from their table, tail flicking with purpose.

Biscuit trotted a few rows forward and began sniffing intently at the floor beneath a window seat. With a low huff, he crouched and pawed once, then twice, before nudging something forward with his nose.

Tilly leaned out of her seat. "What's he found?"

Mari knelt beside Biscuit and reached into the shadows under the seat. Her fingers closed around something cold and metallic. She pulled it into the light.

It was a key. It must have slipped from the back of the seat with the train's vibration.

Not just any key, an ornate, antique one. Heavy, brass, with intricate scrollwork along the handle and a faintly tarnished sheen. It looked like it belonged in an old novel or an heirloom jewelry box, not on a train.

Tilly peered over her shoulder. “That’s not your everyday luggage lock.”

“No,” Mari murmured. “It’s not.”

She turned it over in her hand, noting a faint engraving on the bow: a curling script *D.H.* or *B.H.* It was hard to tell through the wear. The teeth were long and sharply cut. It must have fallen off of the seat. Who was sitting there earlier?

Mari stood and scanned the nearby seats. None of the passengers seemed to notice or claim it. Miles was absorbed in a travel magazine, and Tara stared blankly out the window, face unreadable.

“Think it’s connected?” Tilly whispered.

Mari glanced across the aisle. Tara was still staring out the window, but her fingers had curled tightly around the edge of her scarf. She wasn’t reading, wasn’t fidgeting – just watching the snowy blur outside, her jaw set tight.

Was it Mari’s imagination, or did Tara look like she was trying too hard not to look interested?

Mari slipped the key into her pocket. “I think everything on this train is connected. The trick is figuring out how.”

Biscuit barked once, softly, and settled back into a sphinx-like pose, as if satisfied he’d done his part.

Mari ran a hand through her hair. “Add one antique key to the list of questions.”

Tilly pulled the notepad from Mari’s purse. “Mystery Clue Number Three. Check.”

Outside, the snow had started to fall again - gentle and hushed, like the sky itself was holding its breath along with Mari. It mirrored the tension she felt rising inside, each flake a silent reminder that something was brewing,

just out of reach. With a slight jolt the train had started to slowly move again.

Inside, Mari felt the click of something beginning to fall into place. Even if she didn't yet know what lock the key would open.

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After tucking the mysterious key into her coat pocket, Mari settled back into her seat, Biscuit curling up beside her like a satisfied sleuth. The rattle of the train seemed louder somehow, like the walls themselves knew secrets she hadn't yet uncovered.

Tilly had resumed flipping through her travel guide. She held it upside down at first, lost in thought, before righting it with a mutter. "There's something off about all this."

Mari gave her a sidelong glance. "Define 'off.'"

Tilly tapped the guidebook. "Well, this, for starters. Who brings a tourist guide onto a train to a town they're supposedly already familiar with? I found it under Eloise's seat in the common area after we first heard the news."

Mari sat up straighter. "You didn't mention that."

"I forgot." Tilly shrugged. "There was a dead woman and a panicked golden retriever. I had a lot going on."

Mari took the book, flipping through its glossy pages filled with idyllic photos of coastal cottages and lavender fields. Something about it felt... too pristine – like it had been placed there on purpose, untouched and staged, as if waiting for someone to find what was hidden inside. She flipped to the back and paused.

The pages stuck slightly. Frowning, she pried two apart and felt the telltale resistance of something thin and folded.

Carefully, she slid it out. A piece of creamy stationery, crisp and folded in half. The handwriting was elegant, but unsigned:

*“You know what this inheritance means. We both do. But don’t think for a second you’re the only one who can lay claim to it. If you board that train, be prepared to fight for what’s coming.”*

Tilly’s voice was hushed. “That’s not friendly.”

“No,” Mari whispered. Her fingers tightened on the page. “It’s a threat.”

A few rows ahead, Tara shifted in her seat. She glanced toward Mari and Tilly, then quickly looked away when she saw them watching. Her hand hovered over her bag for a second, then she dropped it to her lap, as if reconsidering.

Mari folded the note again and slid it into her notebook alongside the envelope fragment, her fingers lingering on the page for just a second longer than necessary. A chill ran up her spine as the weight of the threat settled into her chest. This wasn’t just a puzzle anymore; it was personal. Her instincts, fine-tuned by years of reading crime novels under warm quilts, flared to life.

Whoever wrote that letter had known Eloise was traveling to Wisteria Bay. And they hadn’t planned to let her arrive peacefully.

And if they were still on this train ...Mari had just moved a step closer to them.

\*\*\*

The train creaked as it slid along the tracks, a sound that pulled Mari’s attention back from the spiraling theories spinning in her mind. She glanced

at Tilly, who hadn't spoken in a few minutes, unusual for her friend whose thoughts typically overflowed into commentary with barely a pause for breath.

Tilly was chewing her lip, eyes distant as she stared past Mari to the compartment door.

"You're thinking awfully loud over there," Mari said, nudging her gently.

Tilly blinked and leaned closer, lowering her voice to a near whisper. Her fingers drummed nervously against the edge of the table, her usual humor missing. "I wasn't sure if I should say anything. I mean, it could've been nothing."

Mari tilted her head. "That's rarely the case in mysteries. Spill it."

Tilly glanced around and then pressed her hand to the edge of the table. "Okay. When we were walking up and down the car earlier, just before we saw Eloise's body – I'm pretty sure I saw someone come out of her compartment."

Mari stiffened. "What? Who?"

Tilly hesitated. "That's the thing. It wasn't someone we've seen sitting in this car. Not Tara. Not Miles. Not Bryce or any of the other passengers."

Mari leaned in. "Describe what you saw."

"He wore a brown coat: long, maybe wool. And a flat cap. Kept his head down. Walked fast toward the back, like he didn't want to be noticed. I didn't get a good look at his face."

But as Tilly described the man, Mari's mind snagged on a detail. Hadn't she seen a long brown coat tucked under one of the seats earlier – Tara's, maybe? Or had it belonged to someone else? It was hard to remember now. Still, the thread had caught. She made a mental note to take another look later.

Mari's brain was already piecing it together. "You're sure he came out of her compartment?"

"I'm kind of sure. I've been thinking about it for a while, trying to remember. I noticed he had to squeeze past a luggage cart. And he was careful, almost too careful. Like he didn't want to brush anything. Like he didn't want to leave a trace. I wanted to mention it to you earlier, but you were talking with Nadine, and then I got busy and forgot. Finding that note reminded me I hadn't told you yet."

Mari's thoughts raced. That didn't match any of the passengers who had given their names earlier. And if someone had entered the train mid-route or had been hiding in plain sight... it meant the suspect list had just expanded.

Mari sat back, the seat suddenly too firm beneath her. The letter. The key. The hidden guidebook. And now an unidentified man slipping from a dead woman's compartment.

Tilly's voice was quiet but firm. "Mari, I think whoever killed Eloise might still be here. And I hope they don't know we're watching."

Mari closed her notebook, heart hammering like a warning bell.

They may know she is looking into this, but she wasn't about to stop.



CHAPTER FIVE

## *Baggage Claims*

Mari awoke with a jolt. Biscuit's cold nose was pressed against her hand, and his soft whine vibrated through the compartment. Early morning light filtered in through the curtains, painting the room in silvery blue.

Tilly, already sitting upright, was brushing her tangled curls into something resembling order using a compact mirror and a spoon to see the back of her head. "Let's go to the washroom so I can fix these curls with a real mirror, and maybe get some coffee to clear the brain fog."

Mari blinked at her, swung her legs to the floor, and agreed it would be a good idea.

Back from their errand with coffee in hand, Tilly halted at the door.

"I don't want to alarm you, but I don't think this is how we left your suitcase!"

Mari looked down. Her suitcase was open.

Not just open – ransacked. They were gone for maybe five to ten minutes, enough time to stretch their legs while freshening up, get coffee, and let Biscuit sniff the hallway railings. Did they leave the compartment door

unlocked? It hadn't even crossed Mari's mind to double check or even worry about it.

But now, standing over the disheveled suitcase, her heart pounded in her chest.

"We weren't gone long," she whispered. "And I had Biscuit with me."

"And I was lured away by the siren call of bad dining cart coffee," Tilly added, looking shaken. "Do you think someone actually timed that?"

Her clothing was in disarray, and the neat folder of documents she had carefully packed for her trip to Wisteria Bay was gone.

"This doesn't make sense. Someone went through everything but only the paperwork's missing."

"Maybe they thought you were carrying Eloise's files?" Tilly offered.

"You're both chic, mysterious, and prone to traveling with secrets."

Mari frowned. "But seriously, did someone want to know my business or what I inherited? How would they know I had any connection to Eloise?"

Tilly gasped. "Maybe *you* were the target all along!"

Mari gave her a look. "Let's not jump to melodrama."

Tilly held up a hand. "Let's ease into melodrama. I'm just saying, mysterious envelopes, dead socialites, and now rifled luggage? This train has more drama than a telenovela."

\*\*\*

The train, which had stopped again the previous evening, had remained stationary overnight, snow flurries now dancing outside the windows. The announcement from the conductor that morning was clipped: we will finish our way to Banning to meet up with the authorities and would arrive by

midday. No one could leave, but passengers were permitted to move about the train.

Mari and Tilly made their way to the narrow passage between compartments to get coffee from the lounge car. At this rate a twenty-six-hour train ride was going to take three days. At least they did not have to transfer trains and it gave more time to try to solve Eloise's mysterious death.

As they squeezed between two sleeper cabins, someone came barreling toward them.

Tilly stumbled with a surprised yelp, flailing toward the narrow rail.

Mari reached out instinctively, grabbing her arm and jerking her back.

“Whoa!” Tilly’s hand slapped against the wall as a tall man rushed past them – face partially obscured by a scarf.

“Hey! Watch it!” Mari called.

He didn’t stop.

They stood still for a moment, stunned by the rudeness.

“Is it just me, or do people seem to be getting bolder the closer we get to Wisteria Bay?” Tilly asked, brushing herself off.

Mari didn’t answer. Her mind was racing again.

\*\*\*

Back in the compartment, Mari reached for her notebook which she had stashed under her mattress. Her hand had rubbed against something hard just beneath her notebook. She pulled it out: a slim leather-bound portfolio.

Shocked that someone had been in their room again when she was sure it was locked this time, she opened the portfolio slowly. Inside were Eloise’s property records – signatures, letterhead, and deed notations, nearly identical to the ones Mari had packed... and lost.

“Look at this,” she whispered, spreading the pages across the seat. “These aren’t mine. They’re hers. Someone hid them here on purpose.”

She spread the papers across the bed, comparing signatures, dates, and letterhead, her breath catching slightly as each connection sharpened in her mind. The names, the formatting, even the ink—these weren’t coincidences. They were proof, lined up like suspects in a row, each revealing a sliver of the truth she hadn’t yet seen clearly. Something clicked.

“Look at this,” she whispered. “These property records from Eloise’s envelope—they match the deed transfer forms in my packet. But the addresses are different.”

Tilly blinked. “So... two properties?”

“No. One property. Two claims.” Mari pointed. “My inheritance includes the old Glendower Inn. But Eloise’s paperwork suggests she was challenging that very claim. They both believed it was theirs.”

“Okay, but only one of you ended up alive with a suitcase,” Tilly said, unwrapping a chocolate from her emergency snack stash.

Mari gave her a dry look.

Outside the compartment, voices rose.

They peeked out to see Bryce and Tara arguing near the corridor.

“You think I don’t know what you’re doing?” Tara hissed.

Bryce scowled. “You’re not entitled to anything. Eloise was clear—”

Tara crossed her arms. “She changed her will. You think I don’t know about the envelope she carried?”

Mari ducked back in.

“Envelope,” she repeated.

Tilly nodded. “A tale as old as time. Rich aunt, mysterious paperwork, suspicious relatives, and one nosy antiques dealer with a golden retriever.”

\*\*\*

That afternoon, Mari took Biscuit on a brief walk along the hallway to get some air. Tilly stayed behind “to protect the snacks” and reorganize their evidence, aka nap under a blanket with a cookie.

As Mari passed one of the lesser-used compartments near the baggage car, Biscuit tugged hard toward it. His nose pressed to the crack under the door, tail straight, ears perked.

“What is it, boy?” she whispered.

Biscuit let out a muffled woof, his body tense with alert curiosity, as if he’d caught wind of something, or someone, that didn’t belong.

Mari jiggled the handle, locked. She made a note. Maybe that compartment wasn’t as empty as the porter claimed. Or maybe someone had been hiding in there.

“Good dog,” she murmured, scratching him between the ears. “You’re going to get a whole roasted chicken breast when we get to Wisteria Bay.”

They made their way to the lounge car later, to get some tea and relax.

Mari had barely sipped her tea when Nadine approached. The young train attendant looked pale, her eyes darting to the shadows.

“We need to talk,” she whispered.

Mari set her cup down slowly. “About Eloise?”

“About everything,” Nadine said. “You shouldn’t be snooping. It’s dangerous.”

Tilly stepped closer, hands on hips. “Excuse you. Her sleuthing is tasteful and respectful.”

Nadine ignored her. “Stay out of it. You weren’t supposed to be involved.”

Mari’s pulse kicked up. “What do you mean ‘supposed to’?”

Nadine glanced over her shoulder, then turned on her heel and vanished down the corridor.

Tilly exhaled. “That was normal. Totally normal. People say cryptic threats to me *all* the time.”

Mari didn’t smile. “She knows more than she’s saying.”

\*\*\*

That night, after another fruitless round of comparing documents and scribbled notes, Mari headed to the washroom to brush her teeth. The train was quieter now, heavy with anticipation of the coming investigation.

As Mari headed down the hall toward the washroom, Tara passed her coming the other way. Their shoulders brushed in the narrow passage. Tara didn’t apologize. Instead, she gave Mari a look – not overtly threatening, but hard. Intent. “Some things,” she murmured under her breath, “are better left alone.”

Mari slowed in her tracks. “Excuse me?”

But Tara had walked on, swallowed up by the dark curve of the train.

Mari started to shake her head, then suddenly remembered Tara’s clenched jaw, her quick glance into their compartment, the argument with Bryce. It all clicked – too many coincidences to ignore. Was Tara unraveling under the pressure? Or had she already done something she couldn’t undo?

Mari pushed open the door to the washroom.

Then stopped cold.

The mirror above the sink had been defaced. Jagged letters, scratched into the glass with something sharp, glared back at her, violent strokes that seemed almost angry:

“TURN BACK NOW.”

Mari’s breath caught. The cold air from the hallway met her skin, but it was nothing compared to the chill crawling down her spine.

Her heart pounded. “Tilly?”

Tilly appeared at her shoulder. “Whoa. I don’t think that’s a motivational quote.”

Biscuit growled.

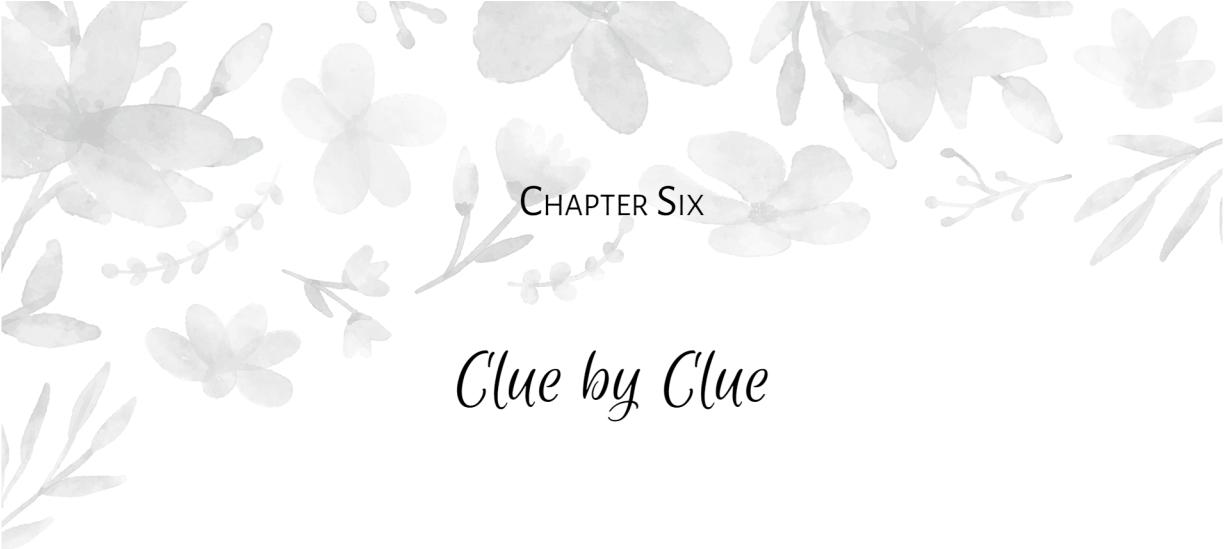
Mari stared at the message, every nerve in her body prickling.

“This isn’t about curiosity anymore,” she whispered. “It’s a warning.”

Later, as Tilly snored softly and Biscuit lay curled at her feet, Mari stared out the small window into the dark. The tracks stretched ahead, swallowed by night.

Somewhere up ahead was Wisteria Bay.

And she was starting to think that her inheritance came wrapped in a whole lot more than a coastal breeze and a welcome sign.



## CHAPTER SIX

### *Clue by Clue*

Mari stared at the frost-rimmed window, the chill seeping through the pane and into her bones. Her thoughts drifted like the mist curling beyond the glass – unfocused, elusive, and laced with unease. The train had resumed its journey, but nothing felt normal. Not after a ransacked suitcase, a scratched mirror message, and too many evasive glances.

She sat cross-legged on the sleeper car bench, a notepad balanced on one knee, pen poised but unmoving, her thoughts a tangle of frustration and rising urgency, like a clock ticking louder with every unanswered question, her gaze fixed on the blank page as thoughts circled like restless passengers in her mind. Biscuit was curled beside her, snoring softly. Tilly, for once, had been quiet, sipping tea and watching her best friend work.

"You've been staring at that same sentence for seven minutes," Tilly said.  
"And you spelled 'inheritance' with three Ns."

Mari blinked, then exhaled. "I thought if I laid everything out, timeline-style, it might make sense."

"Like string on a corkboard but more portable," Tilly nodded. "Very Agatha Christie meets Pinterest."

Mari cracked a faint smile.

Mari began reading aloud from her notes, ticking each point with her pen:

"Boarded the train in Charleston. Eloise was already on board. She was seen by Nadine, the attendant, arguing with someone on the phone. She had a sealed envelope labeled Glendower Estate, which Bryce hinted was tied to a legal dispute. She was found dead in her locked compartment. My suitcase was broken into, my inheritance paperwork taken. Envelope with her name on it said 'inheritance dispute.' Tilly saw someone exit her compartment who shouldn't have been there."

Tilly lifted a brow. "And don't forget Biscuit's dramatic sniffing tour of Miles's duffel bag."

Mari nodded, underlining a name. "Miles."

They were interrupted by a knock at the door.

It was Sunny Pennington, the energetic train activity coordinator, arms full of lost-and-found items.

"Morning! I was sorting through left-behinds and this fell behind a table in Eloise's birth. Thought it looked important."

She handed Mari a folded tourist map of the East Coastal Railways. A red marker had circled several official stops... and one *unofficial*.

"Is that...?" Mari asked.

"Yeah," Sunny said. "That stop doesn't exist anymore. Decommissioned after a flood two years ago."

Mari opened the map fully. "Why would Eloise have this?"

Sunny shrugged. "Thought you'd want to know. You've kinda got that Nancy Drew vibe."

Tilly gave a mock-serious salute. "Compliment accepted. It's also our brand."

As Sunny left, Mari sat back down and opened her notes again, a new piece of the puzzle fitting into place.

Mari leaned back against the window, her breath fogging a faint circle on the glass. The hidden stop gnawed at her thoughts like a loose thread in a well-worn sweater. "If someone got off or on there," she said slowly, "it could explain how the compartment was locked from the inside. That might be how they vanished without anyone noticing."

"Well, only if they could climb in and out of the window. But that could be why no one saw them," Tilly added.

They were deep in discussion when Tara knocked.

Mari tensed, but opened the door.

Tara looked... different. More tired. Her makeup had faded and her voice lacked its earlier sharpness.

"I need to talk to you," she said.

Mari stepped aside.

Tara sat stiffly on the bench. "I lied before. I'm not Eloise's niece. Not really. My mother was Eloise's good friend. Eloise always promised to help us. When my mother died she treated me like her niece, but there was no more talk of helping financially. I came on this train hoping... maybe to convince her. But it was too late."

Mari watched her closely. Something about Tara's delivery felt rehearsed – like a speech she'd practiced in front of a mirror. And when she mentioned money, her fingers had curled into tight fists

Mari continued to study her. "You're not the only one who wanted something from Eloise."

Tara nodded. "But I didn't kill her."

Mari didn't respond right away. Tara's voice had been quiet, measured, but it was the kind of calm that felt carefully chosen, not natural. Grief looked different on everyone, but this? This sounded a lot like damage control.

"That's the tricky thing about murder mysteries," Tilly said gently. "Everyone says that until someone admits they did."

Mari and Tilly spent the next hour poring over the map, Eloise's letters, and their own theories. Tilly doodled hearts around suspects she liked ("I know he's a suspect, but Bryce has professor swagger") and little pitchforks near ones she didn't ("Miles is a walking plot twist in designer shoes").

Mari found a notation on the back of the tourist map – initials in faded ink: *M.C.D.*

"Miles Carlton Davenport," she whispered.

Tilly leaned over. "Busted. You always know it's the guy with three names."

Mari stared at the name, heart pounding. "If this map belonged to him, then he might've planned to use that stop."

\*\*\*

That afternoon, Mari made a decision.

She stood in the dining car, envelope in hand – identical in appearance to Eloise's – but this time, her heart pounded with the weight of what she was about to do. Each breath she took felt like it might betray her plan, but she held steady. If her hunch was right, this envelope wasn't just bait – it was the match that could ignite the truth.

She raised her voice, just enough for those seated nearby to hear.

"Well," she said to Tilly, "looks like we finally located the original inheritance document."

Tilly widened her eyes dramatically, then whispered, "Oh goodie. Let's leave it out in the open and see what happens."

Mari placed the envelope gently on the table beside her teacup.

Across the car, Miles stiffened.

He rose slowly, smoothing his jacket.

The tea cart rattled past. Tilly whispered, "Incoming."

Mari turned her head just as Miles appeared at her elbow.

"That wouldn't be Eloise's envelope, would it?" he asked, voice too smooth.

Mari stood. "It might be."

"I think we should discuss this somewhere... private."

Biscuit growled lowly.

Tilly popped up. "Sorry, she's booked for private conversations until after the authorities arrive."

Miles's expression tightened.

"Careful, Miss Thorne. You're still sticking your nose where it doesn't belong."

Mari met his gaze, unwavering. "That seems to be going around."

Once Miles left, Tilly sank into her seat. "Okay, that was the creepiest proposal I've ever heard, and I once got asked out by a mime."

Mari chuckled weakly but couldn't shake the tension coiled tight in her shoulders.

"Did you see the way he looked at that envelope? Like he was about to wrestle it from my hands."

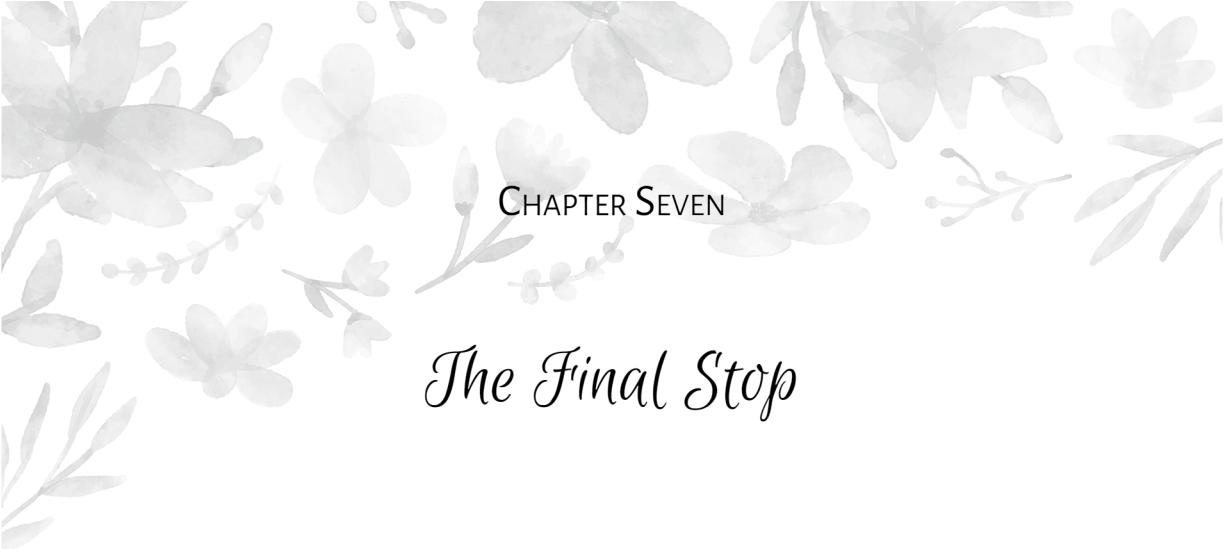
"We need backup," Tilly said. "Or a taser. Preferably both."

Mari smoothed her fingers over the tablecloth. "We're close. I can feel it." As the train dipped into another sweeping curve, the coastal horizon came back into view.

Mari stared out the window, sunlight catching the sea like liquid silver. She whispered, "We'll know the truth before this ride is over." Tilly patted her shoulder. "Of course we will. Biscuit's on the case, after all."

Biscuit gave a sleepy woof.

Across the aisle, Tara sat alone, eyes fixed on the window. She hadn't touched her tea in over an hour – and hadn't looked in Mari's direction once.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *The Final Stop*

Mari's fingers tightened around the lukewarm teacup, the fading warmth seeping into her palms as if trying to soothe the tension rising in her chest, the ceramic edge biting into her skin as Miles's footsteps faded down the corridor like a ticking clock winding down. The moment he vanished, her breath released like steam from a boiling kettle. The conversation hadn't been a threat outright, but it had slithered awfully close.

She needed space, room to breathe, to think. To move without the prickling sensation of predator eyes tracking her every blink, without the ever-tightening coil of suspicion pressing against her spine.

Biscuit gave a soft whine under the table.

“Ready to play our part, boy?” Mari whispered, reaching down to scratch behind his ears. The golden retriever thumped his tail, sensing something in her tone. Tilly had always said Biscuit could read Mari better than most people.

“Showtime,” she murmured.

She stood up abruptly, letting the metal chair legs scrape loudly across the floor, drawing a glance or two. Miles was gone, but his shadow still

lingered like his scent of too-strong cologne. Mari walked briskly toward the far end of the dining car, weaving between tables until she reached the narrow vestibule leading into the next carriage.

Biscuit padded beside her, tail wagging with deceptive innocence.

As she passed the galley, she paused dramatically, pretending to fumble in her coat pocket. “Oh no,” she said loud enough for anyone listening, “I left my notebook.”

Then she turned and doubled back, just as she’d hoped, Miles had rounded the corner at the opposite end, eyes scanning the aisle like a hawk. He froze when he saw her.

Mari pretended not to notice.

At that moment, Biscuit surged forward, barking excitedly and leaping onto a table set with half-eaten plates.

“Biscuit!” Mari cried, horror-laced exasperation threading her voice.

The distraction worked perfectly. Diners gasped. A glass shattered. Biscuit snagged a bread roll in his mouth and dashed under a tablecloth.

Miles’s attention was yanked to the dog chaos. He stepped backward instinctively as a server shrieked, giving Mari the second she needed.

She slipped through the door behind her, up the narrow passage toward the sleeping car. Her heart hammered in her throat, each beat echoing with the weight of what she’d just uncovered and what she was about to risk. The thrum of fear and adrenaline tangled together in her chest, a silent countdown ticking toward whatever came next.

She didn’t stop until she reached the baggage alcove between cabins. It was cramped and dim, with barely enough room for the small trunks and carry-ons wedged along the wall. She crouched and began checking tags, her hands trembling.

Tilly's tip from earlier echoed in her ears: *He stashed something. I'm sure of it. Near where the porters keep luggage.*

There! The third bag from the left. A leather duffel, expensive. A brass plate engraved with: M. Townsend.

Mari's hands paused on the zipper. Her breath caught. Then she yanked it open.

Inside: clothes. Shoes. A shaving kit. And beneath it...documents.

A folded deed. Not Eloise's name on it... but *his*. Transferred ownership. Stamped. Notarized. All too perfect.

Too perfect.

Mari pulled out the second page, her breath catching as her eyes scanned the faint lines. A chill trickled down her spine – the seal, once nearly convincing, now looked like a clumsy echo of the real thing. Her pulse quickened as the full weight of her discovery settled in. This wasn't just fraud. This was the motive. This was the crack in Miles's carefully constructed façade – and she had found it. A faint indentation, not original ink, but a copied seal. A forgery.

Her stomach twisted.

Tilly was right. They had him.

Mari zipped the bag closed and stood, heart pounding.

Biscuit's distant bark reached her ears, followed by laughter from passengers. Tilly, after subduing Biscuit as planned, must have charmed them with her humor. She said she would think of something to keep them distracted.

She exhaled. Time to end this.

Time to end *him*.

Mari didn't bother returning to her compartment. Instead, she cut down the narrow hallway and found Tilly perched on the flip-down bench near the end of the car, scribbling something into a dog-eared crossword book and chewing on a pencil like it owed her rent. Biscuit was lying beside her with leash in tow per the attendant's orders after his escapades.

"Tilly," Mari whispered sharply, crouching beside her. "We've got it. The deed. It's a fake. Miles forged it."

Tilly looked up, blinking once, then slowly grinned. "I knew it. What now? Bribe the conductor with biscuits? Duct tape Miles to a luggage rack – call it DIY justice with flair?"

"Tempting," Mari admitted, "but I have something sneakier in mind."

She quickly laid out the forged document discovery – the way it had been folded just so, tucked with unsettling precision in Miles's monogrammed bag – and how she intended to use it to bait him. Her pulse still hadn't fully steadied from the moment she'd unzipped that duffel and found what could only be described as a masterclass in deceit. Now, it was time to flip the script. Tilly listened with rapt attention, her expression sobering with every word.

"And what, exactly," Tilly asked carefully, "do you mean by 'trap'?"

Mari hesitated. Her nerves trembled just under the surface, but her resolve hardened. "We leak a rumor. That I found a second envelope in Eloise's belongings. One marked *last will and testament*. Let him panic. Let him come to us."

Tilly nodded, straightening. "So you're bait. And I'm...?"

"Backup," Mari said firmly. "Eyes, ears, and maybe emergency biscuit-bringer."

From the floor, Biscuit let out a sneeze that sounded suspiciously like agreement.

They moved quickly. Tilly whispered the “news” to Bryce, who was conveniently holding court in the lounge car, and loudly enough that Nadine, who was hovering nearby with a pot of over-steeped tea, perked up with narrowed eyes. Mari returned to the dining car, resettling herself into the same seat Miles had cornered her in earlier.

Just as Mari settled into her seat with the manila envelope, she caught sight of Tara lingering at the end of the car. Her eyes flicked to the envelope, then quickly away, but not before a flash of some unreadable emotion crossed her face. Guilt? Recognition? Mari couldn't tell. Tara disappeared down the corridor before Mari could decide whether to follow.

She placed a manila envelope on the table. Empty. But convincingly fat with tissue and carefully folded menus to mimic the weight of documents.

She waited.

Biscuit curled at her feet, tail flicking.

And then, footsteps. Slow, deliberate.

Miles entered the dining car, his expression cool, but too polished. He offered her a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

“Miss Thorne,” he said smoothly. “Mind if I join you again?”

Mari smiled tightly and gestured to the seat across from her.

“Not at all,” she said. “I was just thinking about how sometimes people think they've covered their tracks, when really, they've just left footprints in wet paint.”

Miles blinked. A flicker of unease passed through his eyes.

And Mari knew – knew from the glint of fear beneath Miles's polished exterior, from the way his hands trembled ever so slightly as he reached for

composure. The moment she'd been waiting for was here, and the weight of it sank deep into her bones.

The trap was set.

Miles's smile faltered.

He sat, slow and careful, like a man wary of spring-loaded consequences. "I've always appreciated poetic metaphors," he said lightly, though his knuckles whitened where they gripped the table's edge. "But I'm not sure what tracks you think I've left."

Mari tilted her head. "Oh, just some interesting paperwork. I happened upon a deed. Your name's all over it. Well, sort of. It's quite a convincing reproduction. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

His eyes narrowed, the performative charm slipping like grease off a hot pan.

"Careful, Miss Thorne," he said, voice lowering to a hush. "Accusations like that can be... dangerous. Especially when made in public."

Mari leaned forward, matching his tone. "Funny. That's what someone said about Eloise. And look where she ended up."

A charged silence fell. In the clink of silverware and hum of conversation from other diners, their corner felt like a vacuum. Miles didn't move, but his jaw ticked once – tight, telling.

Mari didn't break eye contact. Not when Biscuit sat up at her feet, alert. Not when Tilly stepped into view at the car's far end, arms folded, waiting.

"You don't have it," Miles said finally, his voice clipped. "You wouldn't be sitting here smiling like a smug little—"

"I do have it," Mari cut in smoothly. "And the authorities will have it soon too. Unless there's something you want to say first."

Miles exhaled harshly and shoved away from the table. “This is ridiculous.”

“Eloise knew,” Mari said. “She wasn’t just traveling for pleasure. She was trying to beat you to Wisteria Bay. To claim what was rightfully hers, what she had given to me, her granddaughter.”

He hesitated mid-step.

“Eloise was a fraud,” he snapped. “That deed – mine – is the only real one. She tried to steal my family’s legacy.”

“She died for it,” Mari said quietly.

Miles stood frozen, breathing hard, eyes darting toward the corridor, calculating. Escape or confess?

A voice interrupted the tension like a dropped plate. “Is there a problem here?”

The conductor had arrived, arms crossed, a deputy constable just behind him.

Miles’s shoulders sagged.

“No problem,” he said flatly. “I was just about to leave.”

“Actually,” the conductor said, stepping aside to let the constable through, “we’ll need you to stay right here, Mr. Townsend.”

Miles didn’t fight. Not visibly. But his glare at Mari was searing.

In the blur of shifting chairs and murmured speculation, Mari spotted Tara again – this time hovering near the door to the lounge car. When their eyes met, Tara flinched. She turned abruptly, disappearing down the hall as if she’d been caught eavesdropping or escaping a crime scene.

As the constable guided Miles out, Mari felt her spine finally relax. Biscuit let out a pleased little huff under the table.

Mari glanced at Tilly, who gave a triumphant wink. Tilly had played her part perfectly. Slipping the folder to the conductor saying it contained vital information for the authorities. The authorities searched Mile's luggage, and finding the forged documents, felt it was enough evidence to take him and question him about Eloise's death. Now that her body had been taken to the morgue, the testing would prove what happened. Tilly had handed them all of Mari's notes and evidence. It would be up to the authorities to put the pieces together to formally charge Miles with murder, forgery, and whatever else they could come up with.

Mari, Tilly, and several passengers on the train had to give their statements, and contact information, but the train and its passengers, minus Miles, were allowed to continue their journey.

It was over.

Almost.

Mari remained seated long after Miles had been escorted away, her hands resting on the edge of the table, fingers curled slightly inward as if bracing for an aftershock. The din of conversation resumed around her, but it all felt muffled, like she was watching life happen behind a pane of glass. Her heart, which had thudded with purpose just minutes ago, now beat with the fragile rhythm of exhaustion.

Tilly slid into the seat across from her without a word, setting down a tepid cup of tea she'd somehow procured. She pushed it gently toward Mari. "Drink. You look like you just ran a marathon in heels. By the way, the guy in the flat cap and long coat I thought I saw coming out of Eloise's room and then again in the baggage area that first day...I saw the constable walking with the coat over his arm and the hat in his hand. They must have found it among Mile's belongings"

Mari gave a weak chuckle and accepted the tea, cradling it with both hands. “I didn’t expect it to feel like this. I thought I’d be, relieved. Triumphant, maybe. But mostly I just feel... drained.”

Tilly nodded, watching her closely. “Because it wasn’t just solving a mystery. It was realizing someone died. Someone you were supposed to meet. Someone who – who left you something that changed your whole life before you ever got to say hello.”

Mari swallowed hard. “Eloise Drake was a stranger. And yet... she’s the reason I’m even on this train.”

“She didn’t stay a stranger, though,” Tilly said. “Not really.”

Biscuit stretched out across their feet, sighing heavily like his job was finally done. Mari reached down to ruffle his ears, and his tail thumped in response.

A gentle lurch ran through the train. Mari looked up, catching the shift of light beyond the dining car windows, the pale gold of early morning streaming over a town nestled between bluff and bay. The rhythmic squeal of the brakes began, slow and final.

Tilly turned to the window and smiled. “Wisteria Bay.”

It felt unreal. Like she’d dreamt it.

Mari stood, gripping the edge of the table as the train began to slow its steady rhythm. Through the frosted window, she saw the station platform, a painted sign dusted with snow, its navy letters curling like sea-smoke against the white. Beyond it, gabled rooftops wore winter’s hush like a shawl, and bare trellises stood waiting for spring’s return: silent, still, and beautiful in their starkness.

She’d expected her arrival to be marked by hope, maybe a fresh start. Instead, it was shadowed by loss, secrets, and questions that still hovered

like smoke.

But it was also marked by clarity. Resolve.

The woman who had boarded this train was gone. In her place stood someone sharper. Steadier. Someone who knew that answers didn't always come in perfect packages – but you could still chase them, even through locked doors and tangled motives.

She looked at Tilly, who gave her an encouraging nod, and then at Biscuit, who perked up at the sound of the platform bustle.

“Let’s go home,” Mari said quietly.

And with that, they stepped off the train and into the sun-dappled mystery of Wisteria Bay.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

# Welcome to Wisteria Bay

The brakes hissed, sharp and sudden, cutting through the crisp winter air as the luxury vintage train gave a final lurch and groaned to a stop beside the snow-dusted platform. Mari felt the weight of the past twenty-four hours – murder, mystery, and a forged deed – settle squarely on her shoulders. Yet, as she stepped down onto the platform with Biscuit trotting proudly at her side, something in the salty coastal breeze lifted her chin.

Wisteria Bay spread before them, quaint and sun-kissed, all gingerbread trim and flower-boxed balconies. The air smelled of sea salt, snow, and a dash of possibility.

Tilly adjusted her oversized sunglasses, looking around like she'd arrived at a movie set. "If I don't get a lemonade in a mason jar within the hour, I'll feel deceived."

Mari smiled, her eyes scanning the harbor town. For the first time in days, she let herself breathe. "Tilly, it may be the wrong time of year for lemonade, how about hot chocolate?"

They were joined by a few remaining passengers disembarking – an elderly couple whispering behind gloved hands and a woman with a

sketchpad already capturing the waterfront. One portly man in a fishing hat muttered, “The inn’s still standing, huh,” before he shuffled off toward town.

Tilly gave Mari a side glance. “That sounded like either an omen or a Yelp review.”

Mari only half-laughed.

They followed a hand-painted sign that read: *Bayshore Inn – Est. 1889*. The path wound through weathered white fencing and up a gentle hill flanked with hydrangeas and an overgrown rose arbor.

Mari gasped as the inn came into view.

It was more than she imagined – grander, older, almost regal in its bones – and yet less, too, like a faded photograph where the edges had begun to curl. A haunting beauty cloaked in disrepair.

The turreted Victorian manor loomed in elegant disrepair: paint flaking, vines climbing the porch railings, and shutters hanging slightly askew. The garden was a riot of blooms and weeds, and a tree branch leaned precariously over the roof. But beneath the neglect, it held a timeless grace. The wraparound porch curved like an invitation. The stained-glass transom above the door shimmered with the late afternoon sun.

“It’s like she handed you a broken fairytale,” Tilly murmured.

“I think I love it,” Mari whispered.

Biscuit bounded ahead, tail wagging furiously as he circled the porch and then barked once, as if to declare it home.

Mari laughed. “I guess he approves.”

“Then it’s official. Biscuit for mayor, or maybe town mascot.”

Mari fished the brass skeleton key from her purse, turning it in her fingers. It looked like it belonged to another century.

She hesitated at the threshold.

“Ready?” Tilly asked.

“No,” Mari said. “But let’s do it anyway.”

The door creaked open. Inside, dust motes danced like memory. The foyer was grand – wide staircase, ornate woodwork, a chandelier that looked like it hadn’t seen a polishing cloth since the last century. The wallpaper was peeling in some places, and in others, faded floral print clung to plaster like a memory refusing to let go.

“You know what I see?” Tilly said.

“Possibilities?”

“Lawsuits.”

Mari laughed.

They wandered room to room. Each space told its own story. Faded wallpaper peeled like shedding skin. Antique furniture stood solemn and stoic, with doilies clinging like fragile ghosts of the past. stacks of forgotten linens, and a lingering scent of lavender sachets and age-old secrets. The kitchen had a massive old stove, a lopsided spice rack, and a note pinned on the fridge that simply read: “Don’t trust the left burner.”

In the parlor, a fireplace sat cold beneath a tarnished mirror. Mari saw her reflection...tired, hopeful, and braver than she felt. In the back hallway, they found an old wooden door that wouldn’t open, and Tilly declared it “definitely hiding a ghost or at least a raccoon with unresolved trauma.”

They didn’t hear the screen door open.

“Afternoon, ladies,” came a drawl.

Mari turned to see a man in his sixties with a well-worn straw hat, suspenders, and a smile that had clearly won arguments. He carried a basket of peaches.

He handed Mari the basket. “Welcome home, Miss Thorne.”

The words landed harder than she expected.

He lingered a moment, then added, “Oh, and if you find a porcelain cat in the pantry, don’t move it. Your gran said it was the ‘guardian of secrets.’”

Tilly brightened. “I *knew* this place would have its own mascot.”

After Roscoe left, they stood in the grand foyer.

Mari looked around. “We will need to find a hotel for a week or so, if we stay... I don’t know the first thing about running an inn.”

Tilly tossed her bag on a chaise and flopped beside it. “Good thing I know how to cook eggs, sweep under furniture, and interrogate murder suspects.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I. You solved a murder between breakfast and lunch. This?” She gestured around. “This is just nesting.”

Mari smiled faintly, but her stomach twisted with a tight knot of doubt. The grandeur of the inn was undeniable, yet the weight of what it represented – the unknown, the responsibility, the ghosts of a family she never knew – pressed heavily against her ribs. The inn had beautiful possibilities. And was overwhelming. What if she wasn’t enough for it?

What if she wasn’t enough, period?

She walked slowly down the hallway, running her fingers over the wood paneling. Each creak of the floorboards beneath her feet whispered old stories. She paused at a door labeled “Library” and pushed it open.

Inside was a small, dust-laden room filled with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. Many were empty, but a few shelves still held well-loved novels, their spines cracked and pages yellowed. In the corner sat a worn armchair and a tiny side table with an empty teacup.

It felt like someone had just stepped away. Or never left.

Biscuit wandered in with a cobweb stuck to his ear. Mari knelt and plucked it off.

“Alright, boy. I guess we’re doing this.”

She looked up at Tilly. “A year. I give it a year. One year to see if I can turn this place around.”

Tilly raised a brow. “And if it turns out to be haunted?”

“We charge extra.”

Tilly grinned. “That’s the spirit. Pun fully intended.”

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Roscoe returned just before sunset, holding a worn leather folder tied with blue ribbon.

“Your gran gave me this a while ago,” he said, his voice softer than before. “Told me to give it to you, but only after you’d seen the place with your own eyes. Said the timing had to feel... right.”

Mari accepted it slowly. “Did she say what was in it?”

He gave a small shake of his head. “Just said it’d help you understand.”

Inside the folder was a letter in flowing script, yellowed deeds, and a photograph of Eloise standing on the porch of the inn, younger and smiling.

The letter read:

*Mari, if you’re reading this, it means the train ride didn’t go as planned. I’m sorry for the mess I’ve left you with – and for the time we never had together. But this inn? It was never about the land. It was about finding your way home, and maybe giving this place a future.*

*There’s a girl, Tara, she may contact you. Her mother was my friend. I tried to help them once. I gave her hope, then let her down. She may be angry or scared. But she’s not a bad person. She’s just lost. Please be kind.*

*Miles Townsend is another matter. You may have encountered him by now. Miles isn't just a drifter with a charming smile. He's been traveling the country under the guise of his travel blog, but it's a cover. His goal has always been acquisition – identifying undervalued historical properties and finding ways to take them. Some he flips. Others he sells to developers. But Wisteria Bay was different. Personal.*

*He believes this inn should have been his – some tangled family history, a perceived injustice. And he was determined to take it, legally or not. I thought I could outmaneuver him or have him arrested. I thought I had time. If you are reading this, I was wrong. I hope he does not cause too much trouble for you.*

*Whatever you decide to do, know that the inn 's deed is secure and it is yours. And you're stronger than you think.*

*Love always, Eloise.*

They stood together on the porch as the sun dipped toward the water. Gulls cried overhead, and the bay shimmered gold.

Tilly looped her arm through Mari's. "Let's make a pact."  
"Oh no."

"One year. Murder-free. Sunshine, good coffee, maybe a ghost story or two – and absolutely, under no circumstances, any more corpses. We're due a little peace... and maybe a haunted teacup."

Mari gave her a long look. "You realize how ridiculous that sounds, right?"

Tilly grinned. "I'm manifesting."

Mari laughed, the sound surprising even herself.

The camera of her life, if someone had been filming it, would have pulled back to reveal the two women, the dog, and the grand, crumbling inn

perched on the hill like a secret waiting to be told.

And somewhere behind its shuttered windows, a mystery waited.