

Chapter One

YOU CAN TELL A lot about a person from the library books they borrow.

June liked to play a game when things were quiet at work. She'd pick a patron and make up their life story based on the books they read. Today, she'd chosen a middle-aged lady who took out two Danielle Steel novels and *The Rough Guide to Iceland*. After some consideration, June decided that the woman was trapped in a loveless marriage, perhaps with a boorish, aggressive husband. She was planning to run away to Reykjavik, where she'd fall in love with a rugged, bearded local. But just as she thought she'd found true happiness, her husband would track her down and announce—

'Well, that was a pile of shit.'

June was snapped out of her daydream by Mrs Bransworth, who was standing in front of the desk waving a book in her face. It was Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*.

'What a pointless load of rubbish. Masters and servants? Capitalist propaganda, more like. I could write better than this.'

Mrs B came into the library several times a week, wearing an ancient Afghan coat and fingerless gloves, even in the height of summer. She chose her books seemingly at random; one day, it would be a manual on plumbing, the next, a Nobel prize-winning author. But whatever she borrowed, it always had the same outcome.

‘I’m thinking of handing my library card back in protest.’

‘I’m sorry, Mrs Bransworth. You can have first pick of the new stock if you like?’

‘Probably all crap,’ Mrs B said, and she stormed off towards the Sports shelf, leaving a faint smell of wet goat lingering at the desk.

June finished loading up the ancient returns trolley and began to navigate it around the room. Chalcot Library occupied what had once been the village school, a draughty, red-brick building erected in the 1870s. It had been converted into a library eighty years later, but had retained many of its original features, including a slate roof that leaked in heavy rain, floorboards that creaked underfoot and a family of persistent mice who were eating their way through the boxes of archives stored in the loft. The council had last redecorated the library sometime in the nineties, with strip lighting and institutional green carpets. But June still liked to imagine what it must have been like in its earliest incarnation, when grubby-faced children sat in rows of desks where the shelves now stood, learning to write their letters on dusty slates like a scene from *Jane Eyre*.

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As she pushed the trolley towards the front of the room, June saw her boss marching towards her, a copy of *Mrs Dalloway* poking out of her handbag.

‘I need to see you in my office. Now.’

Marjorie Spencer was the library manager, a title she wore pinned to her blouse like a war medal. She claimed to only read highbrow literary novels, but June knew she’d renewed *Fifty Shades of Grey* at least three times.

June followed her boss into the office. It was actually a stock cupboard-cum-staffroom, but Marjorie had put in a desk years ago and had even hung a name plaque on the door. There was no space for any other chairs, so June perched on a stack of printer paper.

‘This is strictly *entre nous*, but I’ve just had a call from the council,’ Marjorie said, fiddling with the string of pearls around her neck. ‘They want me to go in on Monday for an urgent meeting. In the boardroom.’ She paused to check that June was suitably impressed with this information. ‘You’ll have to manage on your own while I’m gone.’

‘OK, that’s fine.’

‘It’s too short notice to cancel Rhyme Time, so I’ll need you to take it for me too.’

June felt her chest tightening. ‘Actually, I’m sorry, I forgot but Alan has a—’

‘No buts. Besides, it will be good practice for you – once I retire at Christmas, my replacement may want you to take over the sessions anyway.’

June's stomach dropped at the thought. 'Marjorie, you know I can't—'

'For goodness' sake, June, it's children's nursery rhymes, not *Songs of Praise*.'

June opened her mouth to argue, but Marjorie had turned to her computer in a manner that said 'Do Not Disturb'.

June left the office, trying to ignore the tightening in her chest. It was almost five o'clock, so she began the closing-down routine. As she tidied up the abandoned books and newspapers, she pictured all the expectant faces at Rhyme Time, the children and parents watching her impatiently, waiting for her to speak. June let out an involuntary shudder and dropped a pile of newspapers on the floor.

'Do you need a hand, my dear?' Stanley Phelps was sitting in his chair, watching her.

'Thanks, but I'm fine,' she said, picking up the scattered pages. 'It's five o'clock now, I'm afraid it's time to go home.'

'May I request your assistance first? *Organise liaison to prevent this*. Nine letters, first letter I.'

June thought for a moment, breaking the clue down in her mind like he'd taught her. 'Could it be isolation?'

'Brava!'

Stanley Phelps, who enjoyed historical fiction set in the Second World War, had come to the library almost every

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day since June started working there ten years ago. He wore a tweed jacket and spoke like a character from a P.G. Wodehouse novel, and she pictured him living in faded grandeur, sleeping in silk pyjamas and eating kippers for breakfast. The *Telegraph* crossword was one of his daily rituals.

‘Now, before I leave, I have a little something for you.’ Stanley reached into a crumpled old Bag for Life and pulled out a small bunch of wilting flowers, held together by a piece of string. ‘Happy birthday, June.’

‘Oh, Stanley, you didn’t have to,’ June said, feeling herself blush. She never discussed her private life with anyone at the library, but years ago, Stanley had somehow discovered her birthday, and he’d never once forgotten it since.

‘Are you doing anything special tonight?’ he said.

‘I’m just seeing some old friends.’

‘Well, I hope you have fun. You deserve a grand celebration.’

‘Thank you,’ June said, staring down at the flowers so she didn’t have to look him in the eye.

At five thirty, June stepped outside into the warm, early-summer evening. She locked up the heavy library door and made her way down The Parade, past the village shop, the pub with Union Jack bunting fluttering over the door,

the old bakery where she and her mum had bought jam doughnuts every Saturday. A couple of library patrons were standing outside the post office, and June nodded a silent hello as she turned down the hill, past the village green and the Golden Dragon takeaway, and left into the Willowmead estate. Built in the 1960s, it was a rabbit warren of identical semi-detached houses, with boxy gardens and wheelie bins sitting in front driveways. It was here that June had lived since she was four years old, in a house with a green front door and faded red curtains.

‘I’m home!’

June took off her cardigan, left her shoes on the rack ready for Monday morning and went through into the lounge. One of the picture frames was crooked and June straightened it, frowning at the frizzy-haired, brace-wearing teenager staring back at her. Thankfully the braces were long gone, although she was still stuck with that crazy mass of brown curls, now tamed every day in a tight bun. With the picture back as it should be, June crossed the living room to the large bookcase which filled the left-hand wall, crammed with neat rows of spines. Adichie, C.; Alcott, L.M.; Angelou, M. She found the one she wanted and carried it through to the kitchen, where she put a lasagne ready-meal in the microwave and poured herself a glass of wine.

There was no sign of life, the house still apart from the faint noise of a TV from next door. June picked up this

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morning's post: a flyer about bin collections and a copy of the *Dunningshire Gazette*. She checked inside the paper in case any birthday cards had got caught up in there, but there was nothing. A small sigh escaped June's mouth and she took a gulp of wine.

The microwave pinged, making her jump. She fetched the lasagne and spooned it onto a plate, adding a few slices of cucumber as a garnish. Sitting down, she picked up her book. It was battered and worn from years of reading, the words *Pride and Prejudice* on the front cover barely legible now. Carefully, she opened it to read the inscription. *18th June 2005. To my darling Junebug. Happiest of twelfth birthdays. You are never alone when you have a good book. All my love, Mum xx*

June ate a mouthful of food, turned to the first page and began to read.