



Nowhere *to be* Found

Secrets of the
BLUE HILL LIBRARY



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CHAPTER ONE

Anne Gibson stood with a workman in the front hall of her Aunt Edie's beautiful Victorian home, staring straight up—at the clear blue sky overhead. When she'd left for lunch, everything had been just as it ought to be, with the sounds of energetic hammering ringing from various rooms of the old house, and puffs of construction dust occasionally pouring out an open window as an old panel of drywall came down to make way for new library shelves.

But in the short hour it had taken her to get Liddie and Ben down to the corner and feed them lunch, a section of the roof about the size of an oriental rug had collapsed into the hall below. It now lay scattered in large chunks all over the entrance, with some pieces trailing up the grand staircase.

Liddie, her rambunctious five year old daughter, squinted up at the sky. "I need my sunglasses," she said.

Ben, Anne's nine-year old son, quickly turned to his mother's purse, which still hung from Anne's shoulder. He hunted through it expertly, found Liddie's white Minnie-mouse sunglasses, and gave them to her.

Anne ruffled Ben's hair. "Thank you, Ben," she said.

"You might call it a blessing in disguise, actually," the workman told her cheerfully. "Rot like that, it's gotta come down sometime. At least this way it didn't come down next month, with all the books here."

Anne nodded, hoping that she seemed cool and in control, and trying desperately to think of an intelligent question to ask. She knew better than to ask any of the first ones that sprang to mind:

What am I doing here? What was I thinking, coming back home to start a library? Why would God let the roof fall in?

Liddie crouched and reached for one of the many chunks of drywall scattered at their feet. Just before she made contact, Anne scooped her up. "No, honey," she said. "Those aren't toys."

"It's a shooting star!" Liddie insisted.

Anne glanced back at the piece of drywall in question. Her five year old was right: it did bear an eerie resemblance to the glow-in-the-dark shooting stars that graced the ceiling of Liddie's room. Liddie squirmed in her arms. Anne put her down.

"Ben," she said. "Would you take Liddie around back and find Mrs. Pyle?"

The town of Blue Hill was more than ready to have their new library. Anne hadn't even finished converting her Aunt Edie's house, and not one book had yet arrived in town, but a group of mothers had already organized a library day camp. The first Anne had heard of it was a week ago, when an old wedding tent had appeared on Aunt Edie's shady back lawn. Less than an hour later it had been filled with kids. When Anne went out to investigate, Wendy Pyle, the camp organizer, didn't apologize or explain: she just invited Ben and Liddie to join them. It wasn't how Anne would have gone about things, but having the two kids out from underfoot during this phase of construction was a godsend. Ben nodded and led Liddie out the door.

Anne turned back to the giant hole over her head. The damage was substantial: it exposed the front hall, but it also seemed to gape wider, over the other rooms on the second floor. She glanced back at the workman, realization dawning. "It's not just this hall, is it?" she asked him. "We've got damage in those upstairs rooms, too."

For the first time, the workman seemed at a loss for words. He shifted from foot to foot, as if trying to decide how much to tell her.

"Where's Alex?" Anne asked.



A shadow fell across the hall from high above. For a moment, Anne's mind raced, trying to understand where it had come from: was the house still crumbling? Was it just a passing cloud? She looked up. Alex's familiar head was silhouetted against the noon sun, peering over the edge of her damaged ceiling from his perch on the roof.

"Someone call me?" he said.

"How bad is it?" Anne asked. She tilted her head back, but raised her hand to shield her eyes from the bright light.

"This?" Alex said. "This isn't a problem. It's all part of the reconstruction plan. We're actually ahead of schedule now with the ceiling tear-out."

Anne smiled. It was good to hear him joke around. She'd known Alex as long as she could remember: they'd grown up around the block from each other, and even dated in high school. But since she'd come home and hired him as contractor on the library renovation, he'd been so professional that she barely recognized him.

Anne pointed up at a chunk of ceiling that still swung gently from a cable in the afternoon breeze.

"I think you missed a piece," she told him.

"You're a tough boss," he said. "Hang on. There's something I want you to see."

He disappeared, leaving nothing but clear sky.

The workman took this as his opportunity to offer her some comfort of his own. "You got nothing to worry about, lady," he told her. "I've seen way worse than this. At Silver Lake once I watched a freak tornado throw a whole cottage in the water. Nothing left but the concrete slab it was sitting on. Compared to that, this is nothing."

Anne looked at the friendly man, at a loss for how to answer. He took her silence for concern. "We don't get many tornadoes through here," he said reassuringly. "And even if we did, this place is built good. It's pretty, but it's solid."

Despite the gaping hole over her head, the workman's praise filled Anne's heart with warmth. She had always loved Aunt Edie's house: the white clapboard, the slate blue shingles, the shady porch with the delicate wooden detailing Aunt Edie painted so lovingly every spring. Inside, it was full of mysterious nooks and crannies. As a girl, she'd loved to sit in the window-seat that looked over the side lawn, or pretend she was a lonely serving girl, living in the little garret that faced the back yard, or take the spiral staircase up to the magical eight-sided room in the third-floor cupola. Aunt Edie's house hadn't just been a house to Anne—it was the stage for all her childhood dreams.

A step fell on the porch behind them. A moment later, Alex walked into the foyer. He didn't stop to talk. Instead, he started up the debris-littered staircase, picking his way between the chunks that had formerly been Aunt Edie's ceiling. Halfway up, he paused and turned around. "You coming?" he said.

Anne hadn't been able to resist that question since they were both six years old. She started after him.

When she reached the second floor landing, Alex was turning around in a slow circle, his head slightly cocked, as if listening for a signal to tell him what to do next.

"Alex?" Anne asked.

Alex put up a finger for silence, then started around the long sweep of banister that encircled the landing. All the rooms of the second floor led off of it. He ducked into the first room to the left. It had been Aunt Edie's art studio, where she practiced whatever craft had currently caught her fancy: drying flowers in white crystals, painting scenes on delicate china, weaving Easter baskets out of reeds and grasses. Now it was bare: Anne had had all Aunt Edie's things packed up and put in the next room to protect them from construction damage. It might have been more efficient to put them in storage, but Anne wanted to use some of Aunt Edie's belongings to decorate the library, so people could feel like they

had a connection with the woman who had donated the property. It was a good thing she'd boxed the delicate objects up: part of the ceiling had collapsed in this room, too, revealing a blinding flash of sky.

Alex worked his way along the interior wall of the room, tapping here and there. When he got to the other side, he seemed dissatisfied. He disappeared into the next room, a tiny sitting area. Of all Anne's hiding places in the house, this had been her favorite. There was nothing in it but a small fainting couch, a little shelf of books, and a star-quilt that covered one entire wall: the perfect place for a young girl to curl up and lose herself in a book. Alex had ideas for transforming it as part of the restoration plan: breaking out walls to add the space to the craft room or Aunt Edie's bedroom next door. But Anne had refused. She wanted to leave this one corner of the house just the way it had been. The couch and the quilt were still there, crowded by boxes of items waiting to be unpacked when the other rooms were finished. She trailed Alex into the little room.

Now he was knocking on the walls in earnest: rapping here, pausing to listen, then moving a foot or so and rapping again.

"Alex?" Anne said. "You're not telling me the walls are unsound now, are you?"

In answer, Alex pulled back a corner of the star quilt, and rapped. The sound was different there: deeper, somehow hollow.

"Yep," Alex said, talking to himself as if she wasn't even there.

"Yep what?" Anne asked.

Alex lifted the corner of the quilt gently, then drew the whole thing back with a flourish.

Behind it, there was a door in the wall.

Anne had never seen it before. She drew in a quick breath and stepped forward.

Alex let the quilt fall, then reached over his head to lift the whole thing down, along with the display rod it hung from. The

large square of wallpaper it had hidden was a whole shade darker than the rest of the room, rich cream, covered with pink flowers and vines. The door itself was a warm yellow.

"Does it open?" Anne asked.

"I don't know," Alex said. "This is the first time I've seen it. I could tell something was strange from the way the rooms came together where the ceiling had fallen."

He nodded at the door. "You want to do the honors?"

Anne stood stock still for a moment as her mind grappled with this new discovery. She'd spent hours curled up just a few feet away, and had never known it was there. And what about Aunt Edie? She was one of the most open people Anne had ever known: warm, welcoming, talkative. Could she have kept this door secret all these years? On the other hand, could she have lived in the house for so long without ever discovering it herself?

"Anne?" Alex said quietly.

His voice roused her from her thoughts. She took another step forward and laid her hand on the knob. There was a space above it in the handle for an old-fashioned key to fit in a lock, but when Anne tried the knob, it turned easily under her hand. The latch clicked, and the door swung open.

Inside was a tiny triangular room, with no furniture but a small writing desk and a simple chair. Light poured down on it from a strange skylight: a four-paned window, set into the ceiling at an angle that would have been impossible to glimpse from the yard. Over the desk was a framed photograph of a young woman in a lacy white dress, with a bouquet of lilies and daisies so big that she had to hold it in both arms. Beside her stood a dark-haired young man who looked uncomfortable in his ill-fitting suit. His mouth was blurred in a smile, but his clear eyes were in sharp focus.

Somehow, Alex had followed her into the room without making a sound. He lifted the photograph gently from its nail.

"You recognize them?" he asked.

