

## CHAPTER 1

# NINA

The letter must have sat unopened for a month on your abandoned hall table as things carried on around it, the correspondence inside quietly waiting for me to find it.

I look down at its crisp envelope as it rests on my black-clad knee, the grain of its paper heavy, expensive, everything about it signaling that the correspondence contained within is *substantial, important*, and I wonder how I could have missed it.

But I have been busy with you: coroners, certificates, funerals, and memorials. The business of losing a father is a full-time, short-term contract with limited perks and a clear cutoff point. Though the admin thankfully fills the sudden gulf of hours.

The letter gathered dust in the worn leather letter holder where you always kept mail, while I tried to impose order on the inevitable chaos that a death leaves in its wake. There is chaos left behind even when the person who is gone was a meticulous genius, like you. And you *were* a genius, or as close as I'll ever come to knowing one, the most fastidiously brilliant man I have ever known.

But the truth is, even you, with all the possible permutations of your thoughts, the clarity of your mind, were still not fully prepared to go. Of course. You were human, you couldn't possibly have thought of everything. Or perhaps you did think of everything and you left things deliberately undone in order to give me purpose. In which case you succeeded, because I have allowed events to carry my full weight along this past month. And I looked for you, and found you, in everything after they told me you were gone.

The obituaries were well researched, kind, kingmaking, even if the kingdom you presided over was a small one. A rarefied one. Your books were collected by the university as your wishes stipulated. A few friends and colleagues were moved to receive what objects and chattels you left for them. Your clothes were dry-cleaned and given to the charities of your choice, your essentials cleaned and distributed.

Death, it turns out, to those left behind, is an activity centered around the cataloging and dispersal of material objects.

I put the house on the market as per your wishes. You knew that I would not, could not, live in it. That it would always be *your* house and as much as I love you, *loved* you, you knew it is not healthy to live in a parent's shadow. And we both know you cast a long shadow.

The rituals, the process, of bereavement held me, protected me from the simple inescapable fact that it all boils down to . . . I am now alone.

I was too busy to notice the letter. And now I see—alone after the party—that perhaps I have been too busy all my life. I was too busy to find someone of my own, to make a life for myself. After all, I had you.

But now, in the silence of the freshly emptied house, I do not have you. And I am not busy. I am whatever the opposite of busy is . . . Directionless? In search of mental employment? In search of a sign? Anything to distract me again—to avoid the yawning void—to not feel the full force of the fact that *I am where I am*.

I am a thirty-four-year-old literary academic with inherited wealth and no one to share it with. A chuckle bubbles up inside me and echoes through the empty house as I think of the Magic 8 Ball you bought me for my tenth birthday, the one I demanded. You did not want to get it for me, believing that even children should not put faith in randomness, nor look for patterns in curls of smoke. "Chaos holds no answers," you told me, a child of nine. "Look for the answers to your questions in the structure of things," you told me. "That's

where meaning lies.” And of course you were right, though you bought the Magic 8 Ball for me anyway after tears and the promise of more applied study. I promised to achieve and you listened.

I cannot help but imagine the forecast that long-discarded 8 Ball might give me now, if I rolled it over and asked what tomorrow holds: **OUTLOOK NOT SO GOOD**. My chuckle deepens—but there’s no point in being morbid, is there? Another sentiment you hammered home early.

Besides, thirty-four is still young, right? You used to joke that mathematicians peaked at twenty-one while biologists peaked at seventy. There was something in it about the predictability of numbers and the unpredictability of living things.

Regardless, I have yet to peak in any sense.

I look down at the envelope again.

A sign would be good.

On it, your address, in cursive black: your name beneath my name. I turn over the thick envelope and slide a clear, memorial-service-manicured thumbnail under the seal. It crackles open satisfyingly.

More of you would be good. One more hug. One more minute. Something to sink my teeth into.

I pull out the thick-gauge paper and take in the sender’s address. An address thousands of miles from England, from our lives. The humidity of the location written into the words themselves, transporative and optimistic.

Clarence, Mitfield & Booth  
Suite 3610-13 Harbor Quay  
Tortola  
British Virgin Islands

FAO Ms. Nina Lillian Hepworth,

We would like to offer our deepest condolences following the sad news of your father, John Stanley Hepworth’s, recent passing.

We are writing to advise you that in accordance with his Last Will and Testament, Clarence, Mitfield & Booth have been appointed as estate executors for your late father’s assets here in the Virgin Islands. We understand that the late Mr. Hepworth’s UK assets are being overseen by Lansdown Lowe with his foreign assets being managed through Clarence, Mitfield & Booth.

We would like to advise you that we have successfully collected in the estate assets, ascertained and remunerated any outstanding debts prior to applying for probate, which is now complete.

We thought you would like to know that in accordance with your father’s Will you are the sole beneficiary and have been bequeathed:

Property: A 3-bedroom Beachfront Estate, Pond Bay, Gorda, British Virgin Islands

When I look up from rereading the letter the light outside has faded and the empty sitting room is lit only by the bare bulb in the socket above me.

My father never even visited the Caribbean.

I wanted a sign and I got one.

## CHAPTER 2

# NINA

Neither the letter, from Clarence, Mitfield & Booth, nor the existence of this new house make immediate sense to me.

My father was not a holiday-home sort of man. The very idea of him sitting *shirtless* in shorts on a sun bed is beyond the scope of my imagination. To say my father was a cerebral man would be an understatement. So a house, thousands of miles from the autumnal chill of London, bathed in sunlight and vivid Caribbean hues, does not sit quite right. The only reason I can imagine him ever requiring a house overseas would be if he had work out there. But he didn't. At least to my knowledge.

I briefly call his UK solicitor; they too have received the correspondence and vouch for the authenticity of the firm. Whatever this house is . . . it is real.

I dial the long international number at the base of the letter. The elongated purr of a foreign ringtone reminding me that a time difference might hamper me. But just as the thought arrives so does a crisp Caribbean voice, a woman, who promptly transfers me to another voice. This one older, male, American.

"Ms. Hepworth, we've been expecting your call. James Booth. I am currently handling your case," he tells me with such a calm, quotidian tone that I have to remind myself of the strangeness of the situation. I go on to explain that I have only just had a chance to open the letter from his firm and was surprised to read its contents. "Yes, of course," he replies unfazed, his tone hinting that this might often be the case in his line of work. "It's been a busy time for you."

He is correct: it has been. I let my eyes roam around the darkening room, my father's now blank-walled sitting room, parquet floors bared, bookshelves hollowed out. I shiver deeply.

"Yes, very busy," I conclude, then clear my throat and refocus. "I'm just a little confused, James. About this letter. This *additional* will. We've already executed my father's will in the UK. This Caribbean property. I wasn't aware of it . . ." I trail off as I realize how unlike myself I sound. I *sound* like a daughter who barely knew her father, but that is not the case. I saw my father every single Thursday night since graduating from university, our games night: checkers, chess, crosswords. We spent almost all holidays and occasions together. I knew his schedule inside out. We spoke about everything. And yet here I am, for the first time, at a loss.

"I see. More than a little surprised then, I should imagine. Yes," James answers, remaining warm but non-committal. "Well, hopefully we can shed some light on—"

A thought suddenly occurs and I interrupt. "Sorry to ask, but could this letter be an error, James? Is there a possibility that you might have contacted the wrong person?"

James clears his throat, caught off guard. "Ha. No, no. Although be assured you are not the first beneficiary to have uttered those immortal words. But I can assure you, Ms. Hepworth—*Nina*, if I may?"

I hum a consent to the use of my first name.

"Thank you. Yes, I can assure you, *Nina*, that your father was most definitely the owner of the property in question prior to his death. There is no question of that. But more importantly, *you* are clearly named as sole beneficiary of the estate in Mr. Hepworth's will. He was very clear about wanting you to inherit the property in its entirety. I can email you a copy of his list of wishes if that would be helpful at this juncture?"

"Um, yes, that would be. Yes," I manage after a moment. The idea of reading anything new that my father has written is suddenly too desperate a need to articulate without fully exposing my grief.

"I will ask Melissa to send that across. Just be aware, Nina, that it is only a legal document so fairly dry in terms of content."

The list of wishes is not a letter, or an explanation.

James has obviously been through the ebbs and flows of this process a hundred times. I take considerable comfort in being part of such a vast and timeless congregation in James's mind.

It takes me a moment to regroup.

"So, the property was definitely my father's. Can I ask when or how he acquired it, James?"

"I'd be very happy to go through everything with you in person, if you're available later in the week?"

Thoughts scrambled, I ask, "Oh, do you have a London office then?"

James chuckles. "Unfortunately, not. No, we would fly you out here to the British Virgin Islands to take receivership. Whenever fits in with your schedule—provisions were made *within* the will itself to cover all fees and expenses involved in the transition of ownership. First-class airfare and transfers have been covered, so I can action your travel arrangements whenever works for you?"

I believe, at this point in the conversation and for the first time in my adult life, my mouth falls open. By the sounds of it my father had another life. A life that included first-class air travel and second homes. His UK assets were already sizable, as reflected in the inheritance I received a few days ago, but this sounds like another matter entirely.

"Nina?" James asks after a moment of silence.

"Yes, sorry, it's just quite a lot of new information to take in." Slowly a new question forms, a crude, blunt one that I do not know how to phrase well. "Sorry, James, but this property, this estate, is it substantial? I mean, how much—" I trail off, hoping not to need to add more. And thankfully James saves my blushes.

"It is a *generous* property, yes, in one of the most exclusive areas of the BVI. But we can get into numbers and the rest as and when we meet."

A generous property. My father was rich. Very, very rich. And I had no idea. The thought snags—because, how did he get that rich?

"But do you know when my father might have bought or used the house, James? It's just, I can't quite square away when he would have gone out there," I ask.

"Well, we can certainly look into these things for you and get into the weeds when you're over. When would you be available to fly?" he asks, his tone pragmatic.

I look around my father's empty sitting room once more. There is no more to be done here and the university has already granted me a sabbatical, my lectures covered, my students aware. Time off "for grief." It seems everyone in my life, except me, obviously, has foreseen that once the music finally stopped, I would need time to scrape myself off the floor.

Mistaking my pause for reticence, which it may well have been, James pushes on.

"Of course, if you would rather not come out in person we can supply e-contracts and assist in placing the property directly on the market for you? If that would be something—"

"Are his things still there?" I interject, the question flying from me before I can couch it in politeness.

"His *things*?" James asks, seeking clarification.

"Yes, does he have possessions out there. Personal items? Is the house left as it was?"

I hear understanding drop into James's voice. "Yes. The house is vacant but lived in. There are the standard personal effects present, I believe. Yes. Pictures, books, personal items." He sounds sad now. I have made James sad; I've managed to depress a will executor.

But that doesn't matter, because the prospect of what I might find out there, in that house, still undiscovered, lifts me out of my void. The idea that I might find more of my father out there, the possibility that our story might not yet be over, is a salve.

A fizzle of excitement crackles to life inside me. I thought I knew everything about my father, but this

house has shown me that, clearly, there is more to know. More of him out there, halfway across the world, and wasn't it just like him to leave something behind for me to ponder, to provide me with a series of questions that demand answers? A puzzle, clues to follow, more to solve. Hope glows afresh inside me, but with it a sharp splinter of fear, because a truth has been kept from me and I cannot imagine why. Good things are rarely kept secret, which means I might find something I don't like in all this. It is always dangerous to look too hard into the lives of those you love and respect more than anything.

It occurs to me that I could just instruct James to begin the process of putting this bizarre property on the market without my involvement. I could request they ship his personal items back to me. Though out of context would any of it make sense? Perhaps it doesn't need to? I could just let my father lie, rest . . . in peace. I could plop the enormous sale value from this *generous* property into my bank, then go back to work at the university and never think about money, or this mystery house, ever again.

But would I never think of it again; or would I always think of it? Of what it meant . . . I would never know. And that would drive me mad, not knowing.

I have never been the kind of person to turn away from an unanswered question. The cat cannot be shoed back into the bag and Pandora's box cannot be repacked. My father would have known that, and knowing that, he deliberately left me the house.

By doing so he is trying to tell me one last thing, about him; he has left me one last challenge, a puzzle to solve. And if anyone could set something in motion from beyond the grave it would be him.

"When is the soonest I can fly out?" I ask.

In the days before I depart, I do what research I can. I scour online for any reference to my father's work abroad but I find nothing. No mention of a holiday home, no clues to be followed.

The initial excitement I felt at this new discovery about my father begins to darken as the question of how he funded the purchase of this property rises in my mind like a specter. What additional work did he undertake to secure this massive asset, and how could he have compartmentalized his life to such a degree that I, his only living relative, could know nothing about it?

I tentatively question a few of his friends: men and women in their late seventies, snowy eyebrows raised in youthful surprise that John had any connection out there. *He never spoke of a second home. How wonderful for him. What's it like?*

I do not tell them the extent of what I imagine it will be like, this *generous* property. To tell them that would be to lead them in the direction of my own thoughts—that a man like my father, a man with a career like my father's, should not have had that much money. Should not have had a secret house.

One of his long-term co-workers, Maeve Rittman, a force of nature now in her late sixties and still lecturing at the university, told me something that lodged in my mind.

When I asked her if she could spare an hour or so to talk about Dad, she invited me to tea at Brown's in Mayfair. I don't doubt she must have thought the meeting purely about my need for comfort post-bereavement, but regardless, she was happy to oblige. That was the kind of man my father was, you see, the kind you care about to the extent your goodwill bleeds to anyone else they might know or like.

At least, that was how others saw him. As the child of a great man, things are often more complicated: he loved me, but I was never not aware that he feared finding his own faults in me. Though what his faults might have been I could not tell you. But I knew enough to know they haunted him. He could not abide thoughtlessness, carelessness, letting standards slip.

In the years we had together, in all the puzzles we solved and games we played, and in all the life we lived, I found myself fearing both losing to and winning over him.

If I lost, I risked his disappointment; if I won, I feared destroying the foundations of our relationship.

Though of course he gave no such indication that this would ever be the case if I did win.

But that is academic. I never really won against him. I did not have that extra spark that seemed embedded in him from birth. I could never win without his encouragement, his direction, his nudging, his sometimes cold pulling away. And when I won, I would burst with pride and he would say he had always known it was there—and we were both happy enough with that, I believe. I was a trier, and that was enough.

I don't doubt Maeve likes me because I'm John's daughter. An undeniable pedigree before I ever even uttered a word. He loved me, so I am lovable.

I have always felt at home with Maeve. But no doubt everyone feels that with Maeve, funny, beautiful, and as close to genius as it might be possible to be, though with the good grace to keep it to herself most of the time.

She smiled at me over the rim of her teacup, her garnet lipstick expertly applied, her eyes still twinkling as they always had.

"I'm glad you asked me to do this," she said after a sip. "You're a long way off this yet but there comes a time in your life when people start to go. Die. And of course you attend the events, but it's never enough, there is still so much left unsaid. Memories to be turned over, inspected. If you can find someone willing to listen to your memories, so much the better. And trust me, dear Nina, you lovely girl, I have a lot of memories of your father."

And she did. Mostly stories about the pranks they played on each other as PhD students at Cambridge. They had been researching in different departments: *she* clinical neuroscience and *he* applied mathematics and theoretical physics, and they might never have met had it not been for their mutual love of bog-standard pub quizzing. Their ragtag quiz team going on to rinse every pub in Cambridge and the surrounding areas out of their accumulated jackpots to hilarious effect.

I found myself childishly hoping as Maeve spoke that this mysterious house on the other side of the world might be entirely funded by pub quiz winnings. That spry, edgy young man she spoke of was so different from the calm, staid man I spent my life with. The stories made me laugh and then they made me sad. I cried a bit. She responded in kind and I was at least spared the embarrassment of being the only one in the piano-tinkling tearoom with damp eyes and a blotchy face.

The questions around the existence of this house introduced a more existential concern, I told her: That if I discovered more, I might lose the old idea of who my father was. That I might find out something out there that destroyed my memory of him and I might, in a sense, lose him again with even more permanence.

With the arrival of a fresh pot of tea and more scones, her tone shifted.

"I know you want me to give you something, some *reassurance* or even perhaps a seismic disclosure about who your father was. But he was a private man, Nina. We shared so much but I never got *in*, if you understand my meaning. He was a closed circuit. He never remarried after your mother. There was a lot of sadness there. He battled it, I think, but one would never know. As far as I can tell he never even tried to find someone else. He was married to his work and his diversions and, in a way, to you."

Maeve broke off, seeming to suddenly see my predicament for what it was and adding, "He was a good man, though. Perhaps he cut off a side of his life to preserve the rest; we do what we must. But don't ever doubt that he was a good man. Secrets or no. No one is perfect, you just need to know that he loved you immensely—he made a life out of it."

Then Maeve reached a delicately boned hand across the table and squeezed my forearm with surprising strength.

"Whatever you find out there: he will have had his reasons. If there is one thing I *do* know about your father, it's that he never did anything without at least one very good reason. If he left you the house, he wanted you to go there."