

PROLOGUE

IT WAS A DARK and stormy night,'" Ellen said, reciting the infamous opening line of some long-forgotten novel. The sentence had the dubious honor of having once been voted the worst opening line of a book ever, although Ellen didn't think it all that bad. If pressed, she was fairly certain she could come up with worse, although admittedly, her once-prodigious memory was no longer what it was. But then again, she decided with a laugh, what was?

Her laugh was surprisingly youthful for a woman her age, more like the giggle of a teenage girl than that of a woman who had recently celebrated her seventieth birthday.

"It certainly is that," her husband of almost fifty years agreed. Stuart Laufer embraced his wife with unusually muscular arms for a man closing in on seventy-five, and together they

stared out the window of their old log cottage at the surrounding trees, whose branches were being whipped into a veritable frenzy by the formidable winds.

It had been raining for almost five hours, the downpour having started at just past three o'clock that afternoon. A series of dark, menacing clouds had appeared out of nowhere, crowding the sky and quickly overwhelming the weak sun. Large, heavy pellets of rain followed almost immediately, bullets from a celestial machine gun. Then came the wind, accompanied by loud bursts of thunder and wild streaks of lightning, then more wind, more lightning, more bullets. Beautiful, Ellen had marveled. Terrifying, too, as beauty often was.

I was beautiful once, she thought.

"This is way too violent to last very long," Stuart had said earlier, as if to assure them both. "Guess I was wrong," he'd later admitted as the afternoon stretched into the evening and was swallowed by the ever-darkening sky. The lights in the small cottage began flickering on and off, casting vague, animal-like shadows on the white walls. "I better light a fire in case we lose power," he said now.

"I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house down," Ellen whispered to herself, recalling the fairy tale of the three little pigs and the big bad wolf, which her mother used to read to her when she was little. Unexpected tears suddenly filled her deep-set blue eyes. Amazing, she thought. Here she was, seventy years old and still crying for the mother she'd lost almost twenty years earlier. As if she were still that little girl curled up in her mother's lap, wrapped in her protective arms. How much she still missed her—her mother's absence almost as strong as her presence had once been. Ellen could still feel the softness of her mother's lips against her forehead, still see the pride in her eyes whenever she looked her way, still hear the drama in

her voice as she read aloud from the Brothers Grimm. Ellen had always assumed she'd read those stories to her own children one day, and after that to the grandchildren who would surely follow. But neither of her sons had ever shown much interest in fairy tales and they rarely sat still long enough for her to get out more than the obligatory "Once upon a time." They'd squirreled out of her lap whenever she'd tried to corral them, preferring toy airplanes to books, and later, girls to just about anything else. Both boys, now grown men of forty-three and forty—was it really possible?—had married women they'd met while away at college—Berkeley for Todd, Stanford for Ben—and moved to the opposite side of the country. Neither marriage had lasted more than a couple of years, and both men had married again, Ben several times, the latest to a pole dancer from Russia. The various marriages had produced five children, three boys and two girls—Mason, Peyton, Carter, Willow and Saffron—where did they get these names?—all of whom were now young adults and none of whom had any connection to their paternal grandparents back east. Ellen couldn't remember the last time she'd spent significant time with any of them. For years she'd sent money at Christmas and at birthdays. Sometimes she received a thank-you note. More often than not, she didn't. She'd complained to her sons, but they claimed to be powerless. "Ex-wives," Ben had said with a shrug, as if this explained everything. Ellen had recently tried communicating with her grandchildren via e-mail, but her brief inquiries into their health and well-being had gone unacknowledged. She doubted that any of them would bother showing up for the fiftieth-anniversary party she and Stuart were planning for the fall. Whatever happened to "happily ever after"? she wondered now.

Ellen heard Stuart grunt and his knees crack as he bent

down to arrange the logs in the old stone fireplace. She studied his weathered but still handsome face, his soft brown eyes narrowed in concentration, his wide brow furrowed, as his fingers, their knuckles swollen with arthritis, struggled to light a long match. Despite the years, the man was still a sight for sore eyes. Even after all this time, he still made her heart flutter. Amazing, Ellen thought, wondering at her good fortune, and feeling guilty she hadn't been able to pass that same luck on to her sons.

Except that marriage was as much about hard work as it was about luck, she understood. And it hadn't all been wine and roses, peaches and cream. There had been days, sometimes even weeks at a stretch, when the thought of Stuart disappearing under the wheels of a bus had been more than casually appealing. There had been times when she'd considered leaving him, once when she'd actually had her hand on the telephone, the phone directory on the kitchen counter open to the listing of prominent New York divorce attorneys.

But then she'd remembered a piece of advice her own mother had given her, about when times got tough to remember the reasons she'd married Stuart in the first place, and she'd thought of his sweet smile and his sly sense of humor, and the way his gold-flecked brown eyes lit up whenever she walked into the room. Soon she was recalling various random acts of kindness, thoughtful gestures, and the gentle way he always touched her, how she loved his keen mind and his open heart. And soon, the yellow pages would be back in the drawer, and she'd be cooking him his favorite dinner of macaroni and cheese. Which was something else she loved about him—that he was so easy to please.

It didn't hurt that their sex life had always been active and fulfilling. Even now, at their advanced age, they still made love

often and enthusiastically. While the acrobatics of their youth may have disappeared, their ability to please one another had not. "You know what the most common form of sex is among senior citizens?" Stuart had once asked, looking up from the morning paper he was reading. "Oral sex," he'd continued with a wink. "Are you saying they just talk about it?" Ellen had quickly countered. How they'd laughed.

She laughed again now, marveling that so many of their friends had all but abandoned lovemaking in the latter years of their marriages, some seemingly without regret. Not that she and Stuart had very many close friends anymore, other than Wayne and Fran McQuaker, she realized sadly, having lost several friends to cancer and others to the simple vagaries of time. The laugh quickly died in her throat.

It probably hadn't helped when they'd decided to abandon city life for the rustic cabin they'd bought as an investment property years earlier. Ellen had always considered herself a real city girl, so when Stuart first brought up the idea of a cabin in the woods, she'd balked. But after her initial concerns subsided—the bugs, the wild animals, the isolation—she discovered to her shock that she actually enjoyed the peace and quiet of the country. She loved the scenic drive through the Adirondacks, the way the roads twisted and turned up the mountains, the way the tall trees surrounded them protectively as they drove, the noises of the city becoming fainter the higher they climbed, then disappearing altogether, replaced by the singing of birds and the sound of water gurgling from nearby creeks. The thought of putting the property up for sale became less and less attractive the more time they spent there, and eventually they'd given up the idea altogether, selling their house in White Plains instead, and settling in the cottage full-time two years ago. Their son Ben had strongly advised against it. But then Ben, a lawyer, had left his

second wife, also a lawyer, for a Russian pole dancer he'd met at a strip club called CHEATERS, so Ben's judgment was somewhat suspect. "What are you going to do if there's an emergency?" he'd asked.

"We have a telephone and a computer," Ellen had reminded him. "It's not as if we're that far from civilization."

"It's a lousy idea," Ben had countered, although he'd never actually set eyes on the place himself. "Just the name freaks me out. Shadow Creek," he'd pronounced with a shudder, referring to the narrow creek that ran behind the old log house. "Besides, Katarina hates mosquitoes."

"As opposed to the rest of us who love them," Ellen muttered now. And it was true—there were lots of mosquitoes. Especially now, in July. And spiders. And snakes. And coyotes. And even bears, she thought, although she'd yet to see one. Indeed, the most intrusive of all the pests in the Adirondacks were the tourists who flocked here in droves during the summer months, many of whom got lost in the woods while hiking the nearby trails, and some of whom actually knocked on their door, asking to please use the bathroom. When Ellen answered their knock, she'd politely decline and send them on their way. If Stuart answered, being the soft touch he was, he sometimes let them in.

"Did you say something?" Stuart asked now.

"What? Oh, no. Just thinking out loud, I guess."

"About what?"

"Just wondering how long this storm is going to last." Ellen didn't want to get into a discussion about Ben and his latest wife, a topic that inevitably digressed into a debate about their failings as parents. Yes, it was true that one son was a doctor and the other a lawyer, so clearly they must have done something right. But just as clearly, they'd done something equally

wrong. Ellen had wasted far too many hours trying to figure it out. Children didn't come with a list of instructions, she remembered reading, and the fact was that she and Stuart had done the best job they knew how.

But it was also true that she and Stuart had always existed in their own little cocoon, never really needing anyone but each other. And that had always been something of a sore spot as far as their sons were concerned. Still, that didn't explain why neither of them was able to sustain a relationship. If their parents' marriage of almost half a century hadn't provided them with a solid enough example, Ellen didn't know what would. Besides, what's done is done, she thought. It was too late to change anything now.

Wasn't it?

Ellen cut across the living room toward the kitchen and removed the black cordless phone from its carriage. "I'm calling Ben," she told her husband before he could ask.

He nodded, as if this was no surprise, and continued working on the fire. The comforting aroma of burning cedar quickly filled the large rectangular space that was living room, dining room, and bright, modern kitchen combined. At the back of the cottage were three bedrooms and a bathroom. The beds in the two guest bedrooms had never been slept in, although the McQuakers had promised to drive up this weekend, a visit Ellen was greatly looking forward to.

She punched in her younger son's phone number and waited as it rang once, twice, three times before being picked up.

"Hello?" a woman's voice answered, her strong accent overpowering the simple word.

"Katarina, hi," Ellen said cheerily. "This is . . ."

"Who is speaking?" Katarina interrupted.

"It's Ellen. Ben's mother."

"I'm sorry. Connection is very bad. I must ask you call back later."

It took Ellen a few seconds to realize that Katarina had hung up on her. "I think we were disconnected," she told Stuart, trying to think positively and deciding to call Todd instead. But there was no longer a dial tone. "Oh. I think the phone's gone dead."

"Really? Let me see." Stuart pushed himself to his feet and walked toward his wife, his right arm extended.

Ellen tried not to bristle as she handed her husband the phone. She knew he didn't mean to imply that he didn't believe her, or that she was somehow at fault for the phone going dead, but still, she found it irritating that he felt the need to check.

"Well?" she said.

"It's dead all right." He handed the phone back to her.

"Will the computer be dead, too?"

"No. The battery should still be working. You can give it a try, if you want."

"No," Ellen said, the urge to speak to either of her sons having passed. "The lights will probably go next."

Stuart grunted his agreement. "Feel like a glass of wine?"

Ellen smiled. "Yes, that's exactly what I feel like."

Stuart walked around the burgundy-and-blue-striped sofa toward the wine cabinet on the far wall. His hand was reaching for a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc when they heard a loud banging.

"What's that?" Ellen asked as the banging took on greater urgency, filling the room. "Is that the door?"

Stuart took several tentative steps toward the sound.

"Don't answer it," Ellen warned.

"Hello!" they heard a voice call out. "Hello! Please! Is anybody there?"

"It sounds like a child," Stuart whispered.

"What would a child be doing out in this weather?" Ellen asked as Stuart reached for the doorknob. "Don't answer it," she said again.

"Don't be ridiculous," Stuart chastised, pulling open the door.

A girl was standing on the other side, the storm swirling around her, water cascading off the raised hood of the plastic raincoat she was wearing. The rain was dripping with such force into her eyes and nose that it was impossible to make out her features, except that she was young. Not a child exactly, Ellen thought. Not an adult either. Probably in her mid-teens.

"Oh, whew," the girl said, flinging herself inside the cottage without waiting to be asked, and shaking the water from her hands and hair, like a large, shaggy dog. "I was afraid nobody was home."

"What in God's name are you doing out in this mess?" Stuart asked, shutting the door on the outside storm, the wind howling in protest.

"I had a fight with my boyfriend." The girl's large, dark eyes flitted about the room.

"Your boyfriend?" Ellen looked toward the door. "Where is he?"

"Probably still in the damn tent. He's so stubborn. Refused to go to a motel, even when it started coming down in buckets. Not me. I said I was going to find somewhere warm. Except, of course, I got lost, just like he said I would, and I've been wandering around in circles for the past hour. Then I saw the lights from your cottage. I'm so glad you were home. I'm absolutely frozen."

"Oh, you poor thing. Let me make you some hot tea," Ellen said, biting down on her tongue to keep from adding, "You

poor, *stupid* thing!" Who picks a fight with her boyfriend on a night like this? Who takes off in the dark, in a storm, to go running through the woods in thunder and lightning? Who does things like that?

Teenage girls, she thought in the next breath, answering her own question.

Ellen walked quickly to the kitchen sink and filled the kettle with water. "This should only take a few minutes." She glanced back over her shoulder at the young girl. Little Red Riding Hood, she thought, as the girl stood dripping onto the beige rug, her eyes casually absorbing and assessing her surroundings.

"Here, let me hang that up," Stuart offered, and the girl quickly removed her raincoat, revealing a slender body dressed in a white T-shirt and a pair of denim shorts. A large canvas bag was draped around her shoulder.

Ellen noted the girl's long legs, full breasts, and large eyes, which continued scanning the room. Her eyes are definitely her best feature, Ellen thought, noting that the rest of the girl's face was relatively nondescript, her nose long, her mouth small. Of course it was hard to look your best when you were dripping wet. Ellen decided she was being overly critical, something both sons had occasionally accused her of being. She resolved to be friendlier. "I'll get you a towel." She walked to the bathroom, returning with a fluffy white bath towel.

The girl was already curled up on the sofa, her bare feet propped under her thighs, her wet sandals on the floor in front of her, her canvas bag beside them. Stuart was sitting in the navy velvet armchair across from her, kind eyes radiating grandfatherly concern. He's always been the nicer one of us, Ellen thought, realizing how much she'd relied on him to smooth over her sharper edges during their fifty years together.

"This is a beautiful cottage," the girl said, uncoiling her feet and taking the towel from Ellen's outstretched hands. "You've really done a nice job with it. I love the fireplace." She began rubbing the ends of her long hair with the towel. "Thank you."

Ellen tried not to notice that dirt from the girl's feet was staining her sofa and that she wasn't wearing a bra under her flimsy white T-shirt. I'm just a jealous old woman, she admonished herself, remembering when she used to have full, firm breasts like the ones now casually on display. "I'm Ellen Laufer," she said, forcing the introduction from her mouth. Maybe if she'd been nicer to Katarina, friendlier to all her sons' wives, she'd have more of a relationship with her grandchildren today, she couldn't help thinking. "This is my husband, Stuart."

"Call me Nikki." The girl smiled and continued towel-drying her hair. "With two k's. I like that name. Don't you? You don't happen to have a hair dryer, do you?"

"No. Sorry," Ellen lied, ignoring the questioning look from Stuart. It's one thing to give the girl a towel and a cup of tea, her eyes told him silently, but enough is enough. And what did she mean by "Call me Nikki"? Was that her name or not?

"You mean that curl's natural?" Nikki asked. "It's gorgeous."

"Thank you." Ellen touched the blond hair she'd spent half an hour fussing over with a curling iron this morning and immediately felt guilty. I should have let her use my hair dryer, she thought. What's the matter with me?

"Is that water almost boiled?" Nikki asked.

"Oh. Yes, I believe it is." Ellen walked back to the kitchen. The girl certainly isn't shy about asking for what she wants, she thought, removing a mug from the pine cupboard and searching through another cupboard for some tea bags. She wondered how long they were going to have to play host to this girl, who couldn't be more than sixteen. Where was her mother, for God's

sake? What had she been thinking, letting her daughter go off camping in the Adirondack Mountains with a young man who clearly didn't have enough sense to come in out of the rain? "Which would you prefer, English Breakfast or Red Rose? I have both."

"Do you have herbal?" Nikki asked.

"Actually, yes. Cranberry and peach. It's my favorite."

The girl shrugged. "Okay."

Ellen dropped the tea bag into the mug of boiling water, thinking that her mother would be horrified. How many times had she told her that the proper way to make tea was to let it steep in the kettle for at least five minutes? Oh, well. Her mother had been dead for almost twenty years, she thought again, and times changed.

Twenty years, Ellen repeated silently, the thought seeping into her skin, like tea in boiling water. Could it really be so long?

"What's taking that tea so long?" Stuart was asking, returning Ellen abruptly to the present tense. "The poor girl's teeth are starting to chatter."

"Can I have milk with that?" Nikki asked.

"With herbal? I really don't think it's necessary . . ."

"I prefer it with milk. Skim, if you have it."

"I'm afraid we only have two-percent."

"Oh." Another shrug. "Okay. And four teaspoons of sugar."

Ellen dutifully added the 2 percent milk and four spoonfuls of sugar to the already sweet herbal tea, then walked back into the main room and handed the sturdy blue mug to Nikki. "Careful. It's hot." She sat down in the burgundy-and-beige overstuffed chair next to her husband and watched the girl lift the mug gingerly to her lips. "I can't imagine what it tastes like. I don't know how you can stand it so sweet."

"That's what my grandmother always says." Nikki took a sip, and then another.

"Your grandmother sounds like a very wise woman."

"She's a witch," Nikki said. Then, "Do you have any cookies or anything?"

What do you mean, she's a witch? Ellen wanted to ask.

"I'm sure we do." Stuart jumped to his feet before Ellen could voice this thought out loud.

"I'm sorry to be such a pest," Nikki said, "but I haven't had anything to eat since lunch, and I'm starving."

"Well, then, I think we can do better than a cookie," Stuart said. "We still have some sandwich meat in the fridge, don't we, Ellen?"

"I think we do," Ellen said, although what she was thinking was, That meat was for our lunch tomorrow. Now I'll have to drive into Bolton Landing tomorrow morning to get some more. Assuming this damn rain stops by then. And how long is this girl going to be here anyway, this girl who speaks so disrespectfully of her elders? Yes, I know we can't very well send her back into that storm, she answered Stuart, although he hadn't spoken. But what if it rains all night? What if it doesn't let up for days? "Maybe you should try calling your parents," Ellen suggested to Nikki. Surely the girl had a cell phone in her canvas bag.

"What for?"

"To tell them you're safe. To let them know where you are, tell them where they can come and get you," she added, trying not to put too noticeable an emphasis on this last point.

Nikki shook her head. "Nah. I'll be all right."

"We have roast beef and a little bit of smoked turkey," Stuart said, his head buried deep inside the fridge.

"I'm kind of like a vegetarian," Nikki told him.

Ellen had to sit on her hands to keep from grabbing the ungrateful girl around the throat.

"How does a grilled cheese sandwich sound?" Stuart asked pleasantly, although the slight twitch at his temples indicated he was losing patience with their unexpected guest as well.

"Sounds good," Nikki said. "I guess you don't get a lot of visitors."

"Not a lot," Ellen agreed. "We're a little off the beaten track."

"You're telling me! You don't get scared, living out here all by yourselves?"

"There are some cottages not too far down the way," Stuart said.

"Far enough. Where's your TV?" Nikki asked suddenly, her eyes once again scanning the large room.

"We've never watched a lot of TV," Ellen told her. Probably another reason the grandchildren showed no inclination to visit.

"We have a radio," Stuart offered as he removed a chunk of cheddar cheese from the fridge and retrieved two slices of bread from the bread box on the counter, then began buttering both sides of the bread. "And we can watch shows on the computer, if we really want."

"I couldn't live without a TV. I'd get so bored," Nikki said. "So, you guys have a gun?"

"Why on earth would we have a gun?" Stuart asked.

"You know, for protection."

"Why would we need protection?" Ellen asked.

"You obviously haven't heard about those people who got murdered last week in the Berkshires," Nikki said matter-of-factly.

The butter knife slipped from Stuart's hand. It ricocheted

off the counter before dropping to the floor, where it bounced along the wide wooden planks before disappearing underneath the stove. "What people?" he and Ellen asked together, their voices overlapping.

"This old couple in the Berkshires," Nikki said. "They lived alone, miles from anyone, just like you guys. Somebody butchered them."

Ellen realized she was holding her breath.

"Hacked them to pieces," Nikki continued. "It was pretty nasty. Police said their place looked like a slaughterhouse. Blood everywhere. It was in all the papers. You didn't read about it?"

"No," Ellen said, glancing at her husband with eyes that said, *Get this girl out of my house now!*

"Terrible thing. Apparently, whoever did it, they almost cut the poor guy's head right off. Here, you want to read about it?" She grabbed her canvas bag from the floor and fished inside it, retrieving a piece of neatly folded newspaper. She unfolded it carefully and handed it to Ellen.

Ellen glanced at the lurid headline, **ELDERLY COUPLE SLAUGHTERED IN REMOTE CABIN**, and the accompanying grainy, black-and-white photograph of two body bags lying on stretchers, surrounded by grim-faced police. "Why would you be carrying something like this around?" she asked.

Nikki shrugged. "How's that sandwich coming along, Stuart? You need some help?" She pushed herself off the sofa and walked into the kitchen.

What's going on here? Ellen wondered, trying not to overreact. "I think we should call your parents," she heard herself say, barely recognizing the tentativeness in her voice.

"Can't. I'm not getting any reception on my cell, and your phone's dead."

There was a second's silence.

"How do you know our phone is dead?" Ellen asked.

Nikki smiled sweetly. "Oh. Because my boyfriend cut the wires." Then she marched purposefully to the front door and opened it.

A young man filled the doorway. As if on cue, a streak of lightning slashed across the sky, highlighting the coldness in his eyes, the cruel twist of his lips, and the polished blade of the machete in his hand.

"Hi, babe," Nikki said with a giggle as the young man burst inside the cottage. "Meet tomorrow's press clippings."

Stuart lunged toward the drawer containing an assortment of kitchen knives, but despite years of regular exercise, he was easily overpowered by the merciless young man, whose machete ripped across Stuart's wrinkled neck in one fluid, almost graceful, motion. "Ellen," Ellen heard her husband whimper, the word gurgling from his open throat as he collapsed to the floor, the young man on top of him, slashing at his limp form repeatedly, Stuart's once-vibrant eyes rolling dully toward the ceiling.

"Stuart!" Ellen screamed, spinning around in helpless circles, knowing there was nowhere for her to run. She felt the girl at her back, hostile hands in her hair, pulling her head back, exposing her jugular to the executioner's blade. She felt something slash across her throat, watched in horror as a whoosh of blood shot from her body in an impressively wide arc.

Fifty years together, she was thinking. Such a long time. And then suddenly, without warning, it's over. *This is way too violent to last very long*, she thought, recalling her husband's earlier words regarding the storm.

She fell to her knees, saying a silent goodbye to her sons as she watched the room turn upside down. The last thing she saw before one last thrust of the knife closed her eyes once and for all was the warm and loving face of her mother.