

The Whispering Library - Chapter One

Closing Time

By half past six, the light on the High Street had turned the colour of diluted honey.

It happened that way most evenings in Ashwood-in-the-Cotswolds. The stone facades, so sensibly beige in the morning, began to glow as though the sun had taken a private interest in them. Flower boxes spilled over sills. A spaniel barked somewhere near the butcher's. The village exhaled.

Inside Whispering Pages Book Nook, Eleanor Davenport stood on a small wooden stool and tried to persuade a copy of *The Moonstone* into a space that did not technically exist.

"Literary optimism," she murmured, pressing gently. "That's what this is."

The shelf disagreed.

Ellie stepped down, adjusted her glasses, and surveyed the mystery alcove with affectionate disapproval. It had begun as a neat, symmetrical nook. Over the years, it had become an enthusiastic sprawl.

The bell above the door gave a polite jingle.

"Closed in ten minutes," she called, smoothing her cardigan as she stepped out from behind the shelf.

It was only Mrs Finch from the florist, still smelling faintly of eucalyptus and good intentions.

"I shan't keep you, dear," Mrs Finch said, gliding in as though the shop were a conservatory and she a visiting duchess. "I've simply come to say, have you heard?"

Ellie smiled in the manner of someone accustomed to hearing most things slightly later than Mrs Finch.

"Heard which particular catastrophe?"

Mrs Finch lowered her voice, though there was no one else in the shop save a cardboard display of spring releases.

"Thomas Lumley. He's dead."

"Dead," Ellie repeated, because sometimes repetition was the only way to make a fact behave.

"This afternoon. At home. They're saying it was his heart."

Mrs Finch's tone suggested the heart had behaved suspiciously.

Ellie's gaze drifted to the front window display. Three days earlier, she had arranged a neat pyramid of Thomas Lumley's latest memoir, *Ashes Beneath the Ivy*. The covers were a tasteful cream, embossed in restrained navy script. The subtitle had been less restrained.

A Village Remembers What It Tried to Forget.

"It can't have been very unexpected," Ellie said carefully. "He was in here last week arguing about font sizes."

"Yes, well," Mrs Finch said, with satisfaction, "he did stir things up."

That much was undeniable.

Thomas Lumley had returned to Ashwood after forty years away, moderately famous, faintly theatrical, and armed with a manuscript that named no names and implied everything. Old rivalries had acquired fresh oxygen. The Ashwood Trust had issued a politely worded statement about historical perspective. Councillor Wickham had spoken about community unity on social media with unusual frequency.

Ellie had stocked extra copies.

"Are the police involved?" she asked.

"Oh yes. Detective Inspector Thorne was seen on the High Street not half an hour ago. Looking very inspector-like."

Mrs Finch paused meaningfully, as if that were a measurable quality.

Ellie felt a small tightening at the thought of DI Oliver Thorne. He had a manner that suggested interruptions were crimes in themselves. He had once referred to amateur speculation as "unhelpful narrative embroidery" within her hearing.

"I expect it's very straightforward," Ellie said. "Natural causes."

Mrs Finch's expression implied that nothing in Ashwood had been straightforward since 1987.

"Well," she said, drifting back toward the door, "if anyone knows what was in that book, it's you."

The bell chimed again as she left.

The shop settled.

Ellie turned the sign on the door to CLOSED and slid the bolt across with a small, decisive click. She stood for a moment, listening to the familiar hush. The faint tick of the antique clock near the counter. The whisper of pages adjusting to the evening cool.

Thomas Lumley had sat in the armchair by the fireplace only last Tuesday.

He had signed three copies of his memoir for her, each with increasingly dramatic flourishes.

For Ellie, who understands that stories are rarely finished when we think they are.

She had laughed at the time.

Now, she found herself moving toward the display with a reluctance she could not quite explain.

The top copy of *Ashes Beneath the Ivy* was slightly askew. That was not unusual. Customers rarely replaced books with reverence.

She straightened it.

Something thin slipped loose and fluttered to the floor.

Ellie frowned and crouched to retrieve it.

It was not a receipt. Not a promotional card. It was a narrow strip of cream paper, folded once.

For a moment, and she would later resent herself for this, she considered leaving it unopened. It had the air of something theatrical. Something meant to be discovered.

Instead, she unfolded it.

The handwriting was tight. Compressed. Deliberate.

Some stories are better left buried.

Ellie sat back on her heels.

The words did not shout. They did not threaten in any obvious way. But they did not feel decorative either.

She looked at the stack of memoirs again.

Then, slowly, she reached for the copy Thomas had signed for her personally and flipped it open.

Nothing fell out.

She checked another.

Nothing.

Her pulse had begun to behave in a way she would later describe as literary irony.

The shop, which had felt companionable moments earlier, now felt observant.

After a beat, she stood, crossed to the counter, and reached for her phone.

She hesitated.

DI Thorne had already dismissed one of her suggestions about parking enforcement last autumn with glacial efficiency. Reporting an ominous scrap of paper found inside a controversial memoir hours after the author's death might not improve matters.

Still.

Some stories are better left buried.

Ellie looked once more at the neat pyramid of books in her window.

Outside, the honeyed light had begun to fade. The village shifted from gold to blue.

She picked up her coat.

"I'm not burying anything," she murmured, though whether to the note, the memory of Thomas Lumley, or herself, she wasn't entirely certain.

Then she switched off the lights, locked the door, and stepped into the evening.