

The Housekeeper's Secret

*A Gripping Psychological Thriller with a Shocking
Twist*

Dipto Prodhan

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For the quiet ones,
the watchers,
the unheard.
May your truth always find a way out.

CONTENTS

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Acknowledgement](#)

[About The Author](#)

PROLOGUE

The first time Claire heard the crying, she thought it was the wind.

It was just past midnight, and the house had gone still. Not the kind of stillness that soothes—but the kind that presses down on you, makes you afraid to breathe too loudly. The kind that tells you you're not alone, even when you are.

She stood at the end of the third-floor hallway, holding the linens Mrs. Drake insisted be folded just so—corners tight, edges aligned. Her hands trembled slightly, but she blamed the chill in the air.

That's when she heard it again. A faint sob. Then a whisper.
"Help me..."

Claire froze. The voice didn't come from the hallway.
It came from behind the locked door.

The one Mrs. Drake warned her never to touch.
Never ask about.
Never speak of.

The brass key on Claire's ring felt heavier than usual.

She stepped closer. Her heartbeat thundered in her ears. One hand hovered over the door handle, the other gripped the ring of keys she'd never been brave enough to use—until now.

Behind her, the house moaned. The old wood sighed. Or maybe it wasn't the house at all.

Claire inserted the key. Turned it.
A soft click.
Then silence.

She hesitated.

Some secrets are meant to stay buried.
But she was about to dig them up anyway.

CHAPTER ONE

THE AD

It's amazing what people will do when they're desperate.

Four weeks ago, I was scraping burnt cheese off a diner grill for minimum wage and trying to sleep in the backseat of my rusted-out Honda Civic. Now I'm pulling up to a house that looks like it belongs in a movie — one of those gothic dramas where the walls whisper secrets and the chandeliers are always just a little too dusty.

The mansion sits at the edge of Willow Creek, a tiny town with more rumors than residents. Three stories tall, with ivy crawling up its stone façade and windows that stare like watchful eyes. It's beautiful. And eerie. And definitely not where I thought I'd end up when I answered the ad.

HOUSEKEEPER NEEDED – DISCRETION A MUST. COMPETITIVE PAY. LIVE-IN REQUIRED. NO EXPERIENCE NECESSARY.

There wasn't a phone number. Just an email. I sent my résumé — padded, of course — and a brief note saying I was reliable, quiet, and didn't ask questions. Which, ironically, was a lie. I ask lots of questions. But people like that don't hire truth-tellers.

I tug my suitcase out of the trunk. The wheels snag on the gravel driveway as I approach the enormous double doors. My heart's doing this annoying flutter thing again. Nerves. Or maybe instinct.

Before I can knock, the door swings open.

A woman stands there, perfectly still, as if she's been waiting just behind the wood. She's older — late fifties, maybe — with silver-blond hair twisted into a chignon, and skin so pale it almost glows. She's wearing a dark green dress that looks both simple and ridiculously expensive.

“Claire Westwood?” she asks.

“Yes,” I manage. “You must be—”

“Eleanor Drake.” She doesn't extend her hand. Instead, she steps aside.

“You're early.”

I glance at my watch. “Only by ten minutes.”

She says nothing, just watches me enter. The air inside the house is cool and smells faintly of lavender and old books. The floors gleam. The furniture is antique and arranged like a magazine spread — not a single pillow out of place.

I get the immediate sense that one wrong move could shatter everything.

“You'll be staying in the west wing. I trust you brought modest attire?”

I nod. I don't tell her my entire wardrobe fits in a duffel bag and consists mostly of jeans and hoodies. I'm already regretting the scuffed sneakers I wore.

“Three rules,” she says, walking ahead of me through a long hallway lined with oil paintings. “No guests. No entering the third floor. And no questions about the family.”

I nearly stop walking. “I thought you lived alone?”

Eleanor turns her head just enough to let me see her arched eyebrow. “Rule three, Miss Westwood.”

Right. No questions.

We pass a grand staircase, its bannister polished to a mirror shine. Above it, I see a door — small, wooden, and closed. Third floor.

“Your duties will include general cleaning, meal prep, and occasional errands. You will not enter my private quarters unless summoned. Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She stops in front of a heavy wooden door and opens it, revealing a small but elegant bedroom. There’s a twin bed, a writing desk, and a window with a view of the overgrown garden. It’s nicer than any place I’ve stayed in months.

“Dinner is served at seven. Sharp.” Eleanor pauses. “I suggest you unpack and rest. You’ll begin tomorrow.”

I nod again, feeling like a child sent to the principal’s office. As she walks away, her heels click sharply against the marble floor, echoing like a metronome.

I close the door and sit on the bed.

No guests.

No questions.

No third floor.

I stare at the rules scribbled in my head like red-ink warnings.

I’ve broken worse.

And I have a secret of my own.

CHAPTER TWO

THE PORTRAIT

The first night in the Drake house is quiet. Too quiet.

Not the peaceful kind of quiet you'd find in a cozy bed-and-breakfast. No, this is the heavy, suspicious quiet of a place that doesn't want to be disturbed. A quiet that feels... watched.

I lie in bed, staring at the ceiling fan above me as it creaks on a slow, endless loop. Outside, crickets chirp. Inside, not even the pipes dare to groan. I can't sleep. My body is tired, but my brain is wired, spinning a dozen questions I'm not allowed to ask.

Who is Eleanor Drake, really?

Why is a woman with that much money living all alone in a house built for ten?

And what's on the third floor?

At 2:17 a.m., I give up on sleep. I pull a hoodie over my tank top and slip out into the hallway. The floor is cold beneath my socks, and I move as quietly as I can, even though I know Eleanor is likely asleep in the east wing.

I tell myself I'm just exploring. Getting familiar with the layout. That's not breaking a rule... yet.

The house is beautiful in the dark, in a haunted fairytale sort of way. The paintings on the walls seem to shift in the moonlight. I stop in front of one — a large oil portrait of a boy around ten, wearing a navy school uniform. He

has messy blond hair, bright blue eyes, and the faintest smile. There's something unsettling about how alive he looks.

I squint at the brass plaque beneath the frame.

Maxwell Drake. 2006.

The name hits me like a slap.

Maxwell.

I've heard that name before. Years ago. When I was sixteen, sitting in the backseat of my mom's car as she chain-smoked and muttered about "that Drake woman" who locked herself away after her son... died?

I tilt my head. The boy in the painting looks too real. Like he could step out of the frame at any moment and ask me what I'm doing here.
A floorboard creaks behind me.

I spin.

No one's there.

"Just the house settling," I whisper to myself.

But I don't believe it.

I turn back to the painting and study Max's face. Something in his eyes — the way they follow you — makes me shiver.

I step back, away from the portrait. My elbow brushes against the edge of a side table, knocking over a small ceramic dish. It clatters to the ground and shatters.

Damn it.

I crouch, grabbing the broken pieces just as I hear footsteps.

Sharp. Slow. Measured.

Coming down the hall.

I look up and see Eleanor.

She's wearing a silk robe, emerald green like her dress. Her hair is loose, framing her face in soft waves that somehow make her look more severe, not less.

“What are you doing out of bed?” she asks, voice like ice water.

“I—I couldn't sleep. I just wanted some water. I'm sorry about the dish.”

She stares at me for a long moment before bending to pick up the largest shard. Her fingers don't flinch at the sharp edges.

“That belonged to my grandmother,” she says flatly.

“I'll pay for it—”

“No. You won't.”

I swallow hard.

She straightens up and fixes her robe. “You will be more careful. And you will not wander the halls at night.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

Her eyes flick toward the painting. “Admiring Maxwell?”

“He was your son?”

Her jaw tenses.

“Was,” she repeats. “Yes.”

I nod, unsure what to say next.

Eleanor steps closer, her voice low. “Children grow up. Some faster than others. Some... don’t make it that far.”

I nod again, because I don’t know if she means that literally or metaphorically.

“Go to bed, Miss Westwood.”

I retreat quickly, broken dish still in hand, and close my door behind me. My heart’s hammering. I dump the pieces in the waste bin and sink onto the bed.

So. Maxwell Drake. The boy in the painting. The boy who died.

But why does it feel like he’s still here?

CHAPTER THREE

THE RULES

The next morning, Eleanor acts like nothing happened.

She's seated at the long dining table in the sunroom, sipping black coffee and reading a newspaper. Her robe has been replaced with another elegant dress, this one charcoal gray and buttoned to the throat. Her silver hair is pinned back, not a strand out of place.

A single place setting awaits me at the far end of the table. Porridge, fruit, and toast. No eggs. No bacon. No choice.

"Good morning, Miss Westwood," she says without looking up.

"Good morning," I reply cautiously, taking my seat.

I half expect her to bring up last night — the broken dish, the wandering — but she doesn't. Instead, she folds her paper and sets it aside.

"There's a list of tasks on the kitchen counter. I expect the east and west wings vacuumed. All mirrors cleaned. Sheets changed in the guest rooms. You'll prepare dinner tonight as well. I prefer something light."

"Any preferences?"

"Nothing red."

She says it like it's a code. I nod, even though I'm not sure what that means. No tomatoes? No strawberries? Definitely no meat?

I eat in silence while she watches the birds flit around the garden outside.

“You’re fortunate, Claire,” she says suddenly.

I blink. “Am I?”

“Not everyone gets to live in a place like this. You should respect the opportunity.”

I nod again. “I do.”

Her eyes flick to me. “Then follow the rules.”

No guests.

No questions.

No third floor.

I repeat them in my head as I wash the dishes after breakfast, even though every inch of me wants to break all three.

By noon, I’ve cleaned four bathrooms and started a load of laundry. The house is absurdly clean — no dust, no clutter. It’s almost too perfect. Like someone’s been keeping up appearances, even when there’s no one to impress.

While scrubbing the upstairs hallway mirror, I pause to catch my reflection. My dark hair is tied up messily, and there are tired shadows under my eyes. I look like someone trying to disappear. Maybe that’s why I’m here. Maybe Eleanor saw something in my application — something broken.

Down the hall, past the guest rooms, I spot the staircase that leads to the third floor.

It’s narrow. Steeper than the others. The door at the top is small, old, and painted the same muted cream as the walls. Easy to miss. Easy to ignore.

Unless you’re curious.

I wipe my hands on my jeans and approach the bottom step. I tell myself I'm just... checking. Seeing if it's locked. It's not really breaking the rules if I don't go inside.

Each step creaks as I climb.

When I reach the top, I pause, breath shallow. My fingers touch the knob.

Cold. Smooth.

I twist it slowly.

Click.

Unlocked.

I'm about to open it when I hear something.

A sound.

Not loud. Not clear. But definitely... something.

A soft shuffling. Maybe breathing. Maybe not.

I hold my breath and listen.

Nothing.

I turn the knob further — and just as I begin to push the door open—

“CLAIRE!”

I nearly fall down the stairs.

Eleanor is at the bottom, her voice sharp and furious. She's not wearing shoes. Her hands are clenched at her sides.

“I—sorry—I didn’t mean to—”

She takes the steps two at a time, her face pale with rage. She slams the door shut and locks it with a key from her pocket.

“That part of the house is off-limits.”

“I wasn’t going inside—”

“Don’t lie to me.” Her voice is low and dangerous. “Don’t ever lie to me.”

I raise my hands, palms out. “Okay. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

Eleanor breathes hard for a moment, then straightens her posture.

“Some doors should stay closed. For your own good.”

I nod slowly. “Understood.”

She walks past me without another word, the key still clutched in her hand.

As I head back down, I glance once more at the now-locked door.
Some doors should stay closed.

But that one? That one’s hiding something.

And I’m not leaving until I find out what.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE WHISPER

The third floor door stays locked after that.

Eleanor doesn't mention the incident again, but something between us shifts. She watches me more closely now. Her instructions are sharper. Her footsteps quieter.

It's like I've stepped on an invisible tripwire — and now I have to tiptoe through the rest of the house.

On Wednesday morning, the air is heavy with mist, and the whole property feels suspended in time. I clean the library — one of the only rooms Eleanor rarely enters. Shelves climb up the walls, packed with hardcovers so old their spines are cracked and titles faded.

As I dust the fireplace mantel, I find a key.

It's small. Brass. Tied with a faded blue ribbon.

I glance toward the hallway. Silence.

I pocket it.

Not because I'm planning to use it. Not yet.

But because the door is locked now, and I want to know why.

That night, after I serve Eleanor a salad and tea — nothing red — I return to my room and lie in bed fully dressed.

The house creaks. It always does. But tonight the creaks are different.

Rhythmic.

Like footsteps.

Coming from above.

I sit up and hold my breath.

They stop.

Then I hear something else.

A voice.

Faint. High. Almost childlike.

“Mom?”

My blood runs cold.

I get up and press my ear to the wall.

Nothing.

I move to the hallway, tiptoeing barefoot across the carpet. I pass the guest rooms and the grandfather clock that always seems a minute slow. I pause at the foot of the stairs leading to the third floor.

I wait.

Silence.

And then—another whisper.

“I’m still here...”

It's so faint I almost think I imagined it.

Almost.

I run back to my room and lock the door.

In the morning, I look for signs that Eleanor was up during the night. There are none.

She sits in the sunroom as usual, perfectly composed, sipping her black coffee.

I hesitate by the door, holding the breakfast tray.

“Did you sleep well?” I ask carefully.
She looks up. Her eyes meet mine. Calm. Cool.

“Like the dead.”

I flinch.

She smiles, just slightly.

“Is there a problem?”

“No. Not at all.”

I set the tray down and start to leave when she says, “Claire?”

I turn.

“Do you believe in ghosts?”

The question catches me off guard. “I—uh—not really.”

She nods, picking up her teacup.

“Good. They’re just noise. Nothing more.”

Her gaze lingers on me. Then she turns back to the window.

But I’m not so sure.

Because ghosts or not — someone is making noise upstairs.
And I think they’re trying to tell me something.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE KEYHOLE

By the time Friday arrives, I've memorized every hallway in the Drake estate. Every painting, every creaky stair, every piece of antique furniture that probably costs more than my old apartment's rent.

Except the third floor.

That's still a mystery.

I haven't used the key. Yet. But I keep it with me at all times — tucked inside the hem of my hoodie. Just touching it gives me a strange, electric feeling. Like I'm holding something forbidden. Dangerous.

That afternoon, while dusting the upstairs banister, I hear Eleanor talking on the phone. Her voice drifts up from the study below.

“No. Not yet... Yes, she seems quiet enough. Obedient, even.”

Silence.

“I'm not worried. She won't find out.”

A pause.

And then, darker: “I told you. He's gone.”

I lean forward, gripping the banister.

Gone.

She can only be talking about Maxwell.

But if he's really gone, then who — or what — have I been hearing?

That night, the house breathes strange.

The air is thicker. The silence is louder. The shadows seem to stretch.

I wait until 2:33 a.m.

Then I slip out of my room, hoodie on, key in pocket.

My heart pounds with each step toward the third floor staircase.

I check over my shoulder. No sign of Eleanor.

The stairs groan under my weight, but I move slowly, carefully, until I'm at the top.

I pull out the key.

It slides into the lock with a click that sounds too loud. Too final.

I don't turn it.

Not yet.

Instead, I crouch down and press my eye to the keyhole.

Darkness.

But after a few seconds, my eyes adjust.

I see movement.

A flicker. A shadow. Maybe nothing.

Then — a shape.

Small. Sitting on the floor.

A boy.

Curled up with his back to the door. Rocking slightly. Like he's humming to himself.

I jerk back so fast I nearly fall down the stairs.
What. The. Hell?

I close my hand around the key.

No one ever said Maxwell's body was found. Only that he disappeared. That Eleanor "locked herself away."

Locked him away?

The thought makes my stomach twist.

Is he alive?

Is she hiding him?

Or is it something worse?

I back away from the door slowly, not turning my back to it.

Because suddenly, I'm not sure I'm the one doing the watching anymore.

CHAPTER SIX

ELEANOR'S WARNING

The next morning, I pretend nothing happened.

I make coffee, scrub the tiles in the guest bathroom, and polish the silver like a model employee. But my hands tremble when I'm not thinking about it, and my mind won't stop replaying what I saw through that keyhole.

A boy.

Alone. Rocking. Breathing.

It couldn't have been a ghost. Ghosts don't have shadows. They don't hum.

And they definitely don't wear jeans and a hoodie.

He was real.

I didn't imagine him.

I'm halfway through changing the sheets in the west guest room when Eleanor appears in the doorway. No footsteps. No warning.

Just her. Staring at me.

"You look tired," she says.

I force a polite smile. "Didn't sleep great."

"Perhaps you're not suited to this house."

“I’m fine,” I say too quickly.

She steps into the room, her heels silent against the rug. She touches the edge of the bedpost, slowly dragging one red-painted fingernail down the wood.

“I hired you because you said you were quiet. Private. Unattached.”

I nod cautiously.

“And you’ve followed the rules. So far.”

She looks up, and her gaze pins me like a butterfly in a box.

“But I’ll say this once, Claire. If you try that door again, you won’t leave this house. Do you understand?”

My throat goes dry.

I nod.

“Say it.”

“I understand,” I whisper.

She smiles — a closed-mouth smile that doesn’t touch her eyes. “Good. Then we’ll get along just fine.”

She turns and glides out of the room, leaving only the faint scent of gardenias behind.

As soon as she’s gone, I sit on the bed and bury my face in my hands.

She knows.

She knows I used the key. She knows I saw someone.

And she’s warning me off.

But why?

Why would she keep a boy — her son — locked away like a dirty secret?

Unless... it's not Maxwell.

What if it's someone else?

Someone she doesn't want anyone to know exists?

My skin prickles with cold realization.

This isn't just a weird old house.

This is a cage.

And now I'm wondering if I've walked right into it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE MISSING POSTER

I make it to town on Sunday.

Eleanor gives me exactly two hours and hands me a crisp fifty-dollar bill as if it's charity. "Buy something fresh," she says. "You're starting to look washed out."

I smile tightly and walk fast once I'm down the drive.

It feels strange being out. The air smells different here—less antique and perfumed, more real. There are people laughing at a café, a teenager on a skateboard, an old woman walking a dog. I'd almost forgotten what normal looks like.

I don't waste time. I head straight to the little library at the edge of town. It's mostly dusty shelves and bored teenagers playing games on the public computers, but there's a local archive room in the back.

And that's where I find it.

An old bulletin board lined with yellowing flyers, news clippings, and school newsletters. I scan them quickly—school fundraisers, lost dogs, church bake sales.

And then I see it.

MISSING — MAXWELL DRAKE

Age: 10

Last seen: October 18th, 2013

Wearing a navy blue uniform.

Hair: Blond. Eyes: Blue.

If you have any information, please contact the local police.

My hands go cold.

There's a photo. The same boy from the painting. Smiling, arms slung around a puppy that's been awkwardly cropped out.

The date catches me again.

October 2013.

Twelve years ago.

If that's him upstairs... he wouldn't be a little boy anymore.

Unless the boy I saw wasn't Maxwell.

Unless someone else is locked in that room.

I glance around the library, making sure no one's watching, and snap a photo of the flyer with my phone.

As I'm leaving, I ask the librarian casually, "Do you remember the Drakes?"

She raises an eyebrow. "Everyone remembers the Drakes."

"What happened to the boy?"

She leans in like she's about to tell me a ghost story. "They say he disappeared after school one day. Just vanished. Cops searched the whole property. Dogs, drones, everything. No trace."

"And Eleanor?"

"Locked the gates. Fired everyone. Didn't speak to a soul for almost a year. When she came back into town, she acted like nothing ever happened." The

librarian shrugs. “We all figured she broke. Poor thing.”

I leave with more questions than answers.

Because if Maxwell disappeared and was never found...

Then who the hell is the boy on the other side of that locked door?

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE LOCKED ROOM

When I return from town, Eleanor is waiting in the foyer.

She doesn't say a word. Just stares.

Her lipstick is darker today. Almost blood-red. It draws sharp attention to the tight line of her mouth.

"You were gone longer than two hours," she says.

Only by six minutes, according to the old grandfather clock. But I don't argue.

"I got turned around," I lie. "Sorry."

Her eyes narrow, but she doesn't press. Instead, she reaches into her pocket and hands me a folded grocery list. "Dinner will be late tonight. I have an engagement."

I glance at the list. No meat. No fruit. Just broth, crackers, chamomile.

"Are you feeling alright?" I ask before I can stop myself.

Her eyes flash. "Why wouldn't I be?"

I look down. "No reason."

She leaves shortly after, dressed in a navy coat with gloves and a hat like she's stepping into a black-and-white movie. I wait until I hear her car

crunch down the gravel drive before moving.

I run.

Not downstairs. Not to my room.

But up.

Back to the third floor.

The key is already in my hand before I even reach the door. I slide it in, heart pounding, and this time—

I turn it.

Click.

The door creaks open.

Dust hangs thick in the air. The room is dim, lit only by a small window high on the far wall. There's a bed in the corner, stripped to the mattress. A bookshelf with a few toppled paperbacks. A child's desk with crayon drawings still pinned above it.

And then I see him.

He's sitting on the floor, knees pulled to his chest, head down. The same hoodie. The same silence.

My voice comes out shaky. "Hello?"

He doesn't move.

I step in slowly, the door groaning behind me.

"I'm not here to hurt you. I just want to help."

Still nothing.

I crouch. “Are you... Maxwell?”

His head jerks up.

His eyes are too big for his face, sunken and red-rimmed. His hair is longer than in the photo, but unmistakable—blond and messy.

He blinks at me like light hurts him. Then, hoarse:

“Don’t call me that.”

My blood runs cold.

“Then... who are you?”

He opens his mouth, but before he can answer—
Footsteps.

Heavy. Coming fast. From below.

I whirl toward the door and slam it shut behind me, turning the key just as Eleanor reaches the top of the stairs.

She freezes.

Our eyes lock.

My hand is still on the key.

Her face—so composed, so polished—shatters.

“What. Have. You. Done.”

I take a step back.

The boy behind me says just one word:

“Run.”

CHAPTER NINE

THE TRUTH CRACKS

I run.

Down the stairs, skipping the last few steps, the key still in my shaking hand.

Eleanor doesn't chase me. Not at first.

Maybe she's stunned. Maybe she's calculating.

But as soon as I hit the second floor landing, I hear her voice. Calm. Cold.

“You have no idea what you've done.”

I don't answer. I fly down the final staircase, gripping the banister so hard I feel splinters dig into my palm.

The front door is still wide open. Her car's in the drive.

I could leave. I should leave.

But I don't.

Because the boy—whoever he is—is still up there. And she has the key now.

If I walk away, I'll never see him again.

And no one will believe me.

Instead, I duck into the sitting room and hide behind the velvet drapes. My heart is hammering against my ribs like it's trying to escape before I do.

I hear her heels clicking down the stairs. Not running. Pacing.

Then silence.

She's looking for me.

I press my back to the wall, listening, praying she doesn't check the drapes. Every second stretches like thread pulled too tight.

Finally, I hear her walk away—toward the back of the house.

I exhale shakily and slip out from behind the curtain.

I need answers. Now.

And I know where to find them.

The study is exactly how she left it. Perfect. Clinical. Like a crime scene disguised as a showroom.

I scan the room until my eyes land on the filing cabinet tucked in the corner behind her desk.

Locked.

But the drawer above it? Unlocked. Carelessly.

Inside are envelopes. Letters. Medical records.

One folder is labeled "M. Drake – Confidential."

I pull it out and skim through.

Patient: Maxwell Drake

DOB: Oct 10, 2003

Diagnosis: Schizophrenia – Early Onset
Recommended: Long-Term Residential Care

There are notes in the margins.

Aggression.
Hallucinations.
Attachment to imaginary brother?
Mother refuses separation.

My hands tremble.

Brother?
There was never any mention of a sibling.
I pull out a second page. It's a school report.

“Maxwell claims another boy lives in his room. When questioned, he becomes agitated. Reports ‘hearing him breathe’ when alone.”

Then, a drawing.

Two boys. Identical. One smiling. The other... blacked out with a thick line of ink.

And scribbled in a child's hand beneath it:

“He's not me.”

Suddenly the pieces fall together like shattered glass reforming:

Maxwell had a twin.

A brother no one talks about.

A brother Eleanor hid.

Maybe from the world. Maybe from him.

But the boy upstairs isn't just someone she's hiding.

He's the part of her past she tried to erase.

And he's not staying hidden anymore.

CHAPTER TEN

THE BOY IN THE MIRROR

I don't remember walking back up the stairs.

I just know I'm there again — outside the door to the third floor room, the folder still clutched in my hand, Eleanor's footsteps echoing somewhere behind me.

I fumble with the key.

The lock resists, like it knows better. But I force it.

The door swings open.

He's still there — the boy. Knees drawn to his chest. He looks up again, this time less afraid.

His eyes flick to the folder in my hand.

"You found it," he whispers.

"I found something." I step inside, close the door quietly. "You're not Maxwell."

He shakes his head slowly.

"I'm Elijah."

The name hits like a stone.

The missing twin. The invisible one.

“The doctors said I wasn’t real,” he mutters. “But I was. I am.”

I sit down across from him, heart still thudding.

“Why are you locked in here?”

“El—” He stops himself. “She said I was dangerous. Said I ruined things. That if people knew I existed, they’d take Maxwell away. So she made me disappear.”

He looks at me. His eyes are glassy but sharp.

“She told the world he was gone. But really, it was me.”

My stomach twists.

“You mean... she let them think you vanished.”

He nods. “Maxwell was always the favorite. The quiet one. The one who smiled in pictures. But I was the one who screamed at night. The one who broke the mirrors.”

He pauses, his voice dropping. “She hated mirrors.”

I glance around. No mirrors in sight. Not even the cracked kind you see in old bathrooms.

“She said I made them lie,” he whispers. “That I changed what people saw.”

I want to tell him that none of this is his fault. That he was a child. That no one should be locked away like a secret.

But before I can speak, I hear footsteps again.

Coming closer.

Then Eleanor’s voice, quiet and dangerous just beyond the door.

“Claire. Step away from him.”

I stand.

So does Elijah.

“She can’t make me invisible anymore,” he says, not to me — to the door. To her.

Eleanor opens it slowly.

She looks older. Pale. Her red lipstick smudged like war paint.

“I did what I had to do,” she says softly. “He was dangerous.”

“No,” I say, standing between them. “You were afraid. Of what people would think. Of losing control. You didn’t protect him. You punished him.”

Something cracks in her expression. A small, terrible fracture.

“I kept the family together.”

“No, Eleanor. You broke it.”

She doesn’t answer.

Elijah steps forward, past me, eyes on hers.

“I’m not your shame,” he says.

And then, for the first time in twelve years, he walks out of the room.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

UNRAVELING

Elijah doesn't run.

He walks down the stairs like he's lived in this house his whole life — and in a way, he has. Just behind a locked door.

I follow him, the silence between us thick with everything unsaid.

Eleanor doesn't stop us.

She stands at the top of the stairs, gripping the banister like it's the only thing holding her together. Her face is pale. Haunted.

In that moment, she doesn't look like a villain.

She looks like a woman whose story has finally come undone.

Downstairs, Elijah stops in the grand foyer. His eyes flick over the furniture, the chandelier, the portraits on the wall.

"I used to sit here," he says. "Before she locked that door. Before I was the bad one."

I can't imagine being a child and having someone decide you don't deserve to exist.

"Elijah," I say gently, "we should call someone. The police, maybe. Or social services. They can help—"

“No.” His voice is quiet but firm. “No more people trying to fix me.”

He turns and looks at me. “You believed me. That’s enough.”

I don’t know what to say to that. So I nod.

He walks to the front door, opens it, and steps out into the sunlight. Like it’s that simple.

Freedom.

I’m still standing there when Eleanor comes down behind me.

“He wasn’t supposed to live,” she says. Her voice is flat. Tired. “Maxwell nearly died when they were born. Elijah was screaming from the moment he arrived. Like he knew he wasn’t wanted.”

I stare at her.

“You made everyone believe Maxwell was missing.”

She gives a brittle laugh. “I made them believe he was the one worth missing.”

I feel sick.

“You locked a boy away for twelve years.”

“I saved him,” she snaps. “From himself. From the world. From being labeled.”

“No, Eleanor. You locked your shame in a room and threw away the key.”

For a long moment, she just looks at me.

Then she walks to the study without another word.

I don't follow.

I step outside into the light and close the door behind me.

The air smells clean.

I half expect Elijah to be gone, like a ghost finally released.

But he's there. Sitting on the stone bench near the rose bushes.

He glances up. Smiles — small, shy, uncertain.

And for the first time, I see him not as a secret, or a shadow, or a mystery to be solved.

But as a boy who survived.

CHAPTER TWELVE

WHAT REMAINS

Two days later, the house is quiet.

The police came. So did child welfare. Reporters followed, drawn to the tragic tale of the reclusive matriarch and her long-lost “missing” child.

But none of them truly understand.

They don’t know what it’s like to live among silence and secrets. To hear footsteps that never lead to rescue. To see the world through a keyhole.

Elijah doesn’t say much. He stays at a temporary home now, a care facility for youth—though he’s nearly grown. He asked me not to visit just yet. I said I’d wait until he’s ready.

Eleanor didn’t fight when they arrested her.

She didn’t cry either.

There’s something tragic about watching someone lose everything they clung to. Her reputation. Her carefully built story. Her son.

And yet... I can’t feel sorry for her.

Not when I think of the drawings. The voice behind the door. The fear.

I moved out of the house the morning after it all broke. I didn’t take much. Just my clothes, my phone, and the photo I printed from the library—the one with the smiling boy and the puppy.

It's not just Maxwell in that photo.

It's Elijah too. You can see it in the eyes. The same shape. The same light.

No one ever noticed.

Or maybe no one ever wanted to.

It's been three weeks now.

I've started a new job cleaning cabins at the lake. The work is simple. Peaceful. I make my own schedule. No locked doors. No whispers in the halls.

Sometimes I still hear the creak of Eleanor's heels on the stairs.

Sometimes I still dream about the third floor.

But most nights, I sleep.

That's something.

Today I got a letter. Handwritten, folded carefully in a plain envelope.

It's from Elijah.

Claire,

Thank you for opening the door.

Not just the one on the third floor — all the others, too.

I didn't know people like you existed.

I do now.

I'm going to be okay.

I hope you are too.

— E

I sit on the porch, holding the letter, watching the sun set over the lake.

And I believe him.

He's going to be okay.

So am I.

Sometimes the worst secrets stay buried for years.

But once they're out, the healing begins.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Writing this novel was both a challenge and a catharsis.

Thank you to the early readers who gave honest feedback and told me what made them stay up at night. Your support and insights were invaluable.

To my creative friends and fellow writers — thank you for pushing me forward when I doubted the story. Your belief means everything.

And to the readers: thank you for taking a chance on an indie thriller. You are the reason these words matter.

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Dipto Prodhan is the author of twist-filled psychological thrillers and dark novellas that blend suspense, emotion, and unforgettable characters. With a love for secrets and stories that unravel one chapter at a time, Dipto writes for readers who enjoy edge-of-your-seat tension and thought-provoking themes.

When not writing, Dipto enjoys exploring old buildings, reading thrillers, and chasing ideas that refuse to stay quiet.