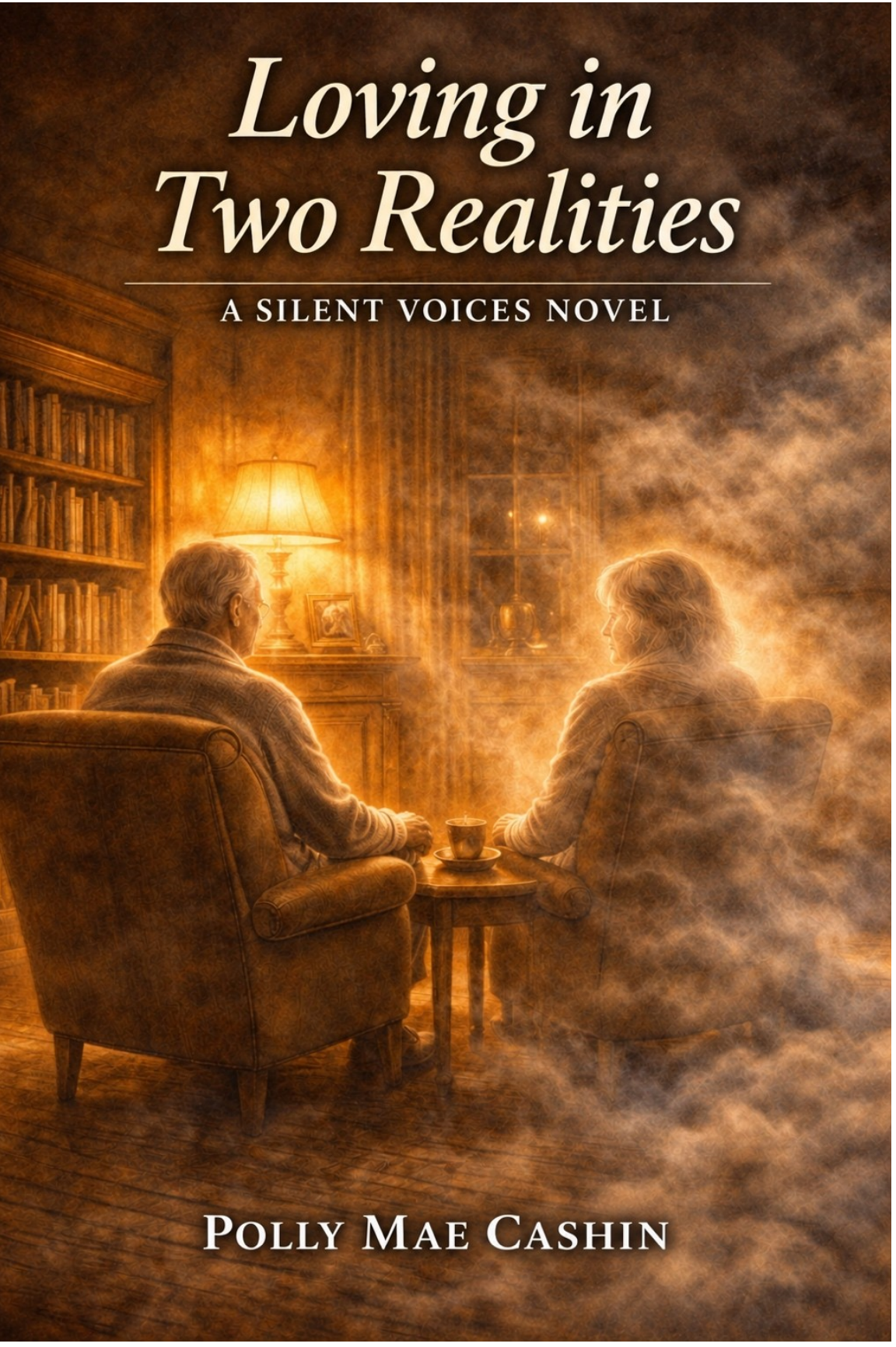
Loving in Two Realities

A SILENT VOICES NOVEL



POLLY MAE CASHIN

Loving In Two Realities

A SILENT VOICES NOVEL

A First-Generation Story

By Polly Mae Cashin

A novel by Polly Mae Cashin
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Chapter 1 | Confusion

The ground beneath your feet
Isn't really dirt.
It's yesterday...
becoming tomorrow.

SEED

George: The Closet

The lake was the first thing he noticed—before the coffee, before the day fully settled into his bones. From the kitchen window, the water lay stretched out like glass that had forgotten how to move. A thin shimmer caught the morning light and held it there, as if refusing to release it.

Behind him, he heard the familiar sound of drawers opening. Then closing. Then opening again.

Metal against wood. A pause. Then the soft, deliberate shift of hangers.

He didn't turn right away.

Not because he didn't care—but because he already knew the pattern.

Finally stepping into the hallway, he called gently, "Can I help you find something?"

The closet light was on. That was new. Or maybe not. Time had stopped being a reliable witness in this house.

Marilyn stood inside with two empty hangers in her hands, studying them like they'd changed their minds about what they were for.

Her sweater was buttoned wrong again.

Not dramatically wrong. Just enough that he noticed.

She'd once ironed blouses for road trips.

She used to set out church clothes the night before—skirt, blouse, earrings, even the right shoes for the weather—so Sunday morning wouldn't begin in a scramble. If a collar sat wrong or a hem looked off, she caught it before they ever reached the driveway.

Now Marilyn sometimes wore winter socks with summer capris, or layered colors that seemed chosen by separate versions of herself.

He'd stopped correcting it months ago.

Most days, she seemed happier when no one told her she was mistaken.

"I was just organizing these," she said.

"Okay," he said.

She nodded once, as if that settled something important. Then she looked past him, through the hallway window.

"It's been a strange winter," she said.

He followed her gaze. The lake again. Always the lake.

"It has," he said.

"It's been warm lately," she said. "Hardly feels like winter at all."

She squinted slightly, like she was trying to reconcile two photographs laid over each other.

“I can see the marks out there,” she said. “From the snowmobiles.”

There it was. Not a statement to be corrected. A place her mind had wandered without telling him.

He looked out at the water.

No ice. No tracks. Just June sunlight moving across the lake.

“You always liked racing them,” he said.

She looked at him for a second too long, a faint crease forming between her brows. “Did I?” she asked. Then she glanced back toward the lake. “Maybe.” Her voice softened.

She sounded like someone reaching for a thing she could still feel but could no longer quite name.

There was a time he would have nodded without really listening. Let her words drift past while he thought about work, or the next drink, or anything that required less of him than another human being.

He’d spent years treating attention like something that cost too much to give. Back then, escape had looked like a bottle, a television turned too loud, a chair angled away from the room.

Years answering with grunts and half-listening and the quiet certainty that there would always be another chance to be better tomorrow.

Tomorrow had arrived.

And now he found himself listening for every word she offered, even when they came from somewhere he couldn't follow— as if attention could be paid backward.

Now he just stood with Marilyn in her reality.

“The lake looks different every season,” he said finally.

She nodded again, slower this time. “I used to know when it would freeze,” she said.

He leaned against the doorframe.

“You always noticed things before other people did,” he said.

For a moment, the hanger movement stopped. The house was quiet except for the soft hum of the refrigerator, a sound that never asked anything of anyone.

The ice maker clicked, whirred, then dropped a fresh batch of cubes into the bin with a hollow clatter. It used to disappear into the background of life, like breath or blinking. Now it meant something. Everything was slightly alarming now—until he named it for her.

“Listen. What’s that noise?” she asked. A faint crease formed between her brows. She held still, as if waiting for the sound to explain itself.

“I think it’s the ice maker, Dear,” he said.

She listened as if checking whether that explanation would hold.

“I can’t keep track of it anymore,” she said, not as a complaint, but an observation.

“It’s okay,” he said.

And he did not say more.

Because in this house, on mornings like this, there was no clean line between what was true and what was remembered. Only the work of staying near each other while the world stopped agreeing on itself.

Marilyn: The Closet

Not just clothes—possibilities. Things that were supposed to go together. She could feel that much. Not the order itself, not anymore, but the fact of it. A rightness. A way things used to sit beside each other without asking.

She set one hanger down on the closet shelf. It slid slightly. That bothered her more than it should have. Things should lie still when you put them somewhere. Things should keep their place.

Outside the door, she heard George’s voice.

Soft. Careful.

“Can I help you find something?”

She almost said no immediately.

But the question wasn’t really about the closet.

It was about whether she was supposed to be doing something else.

That was the problem lately—there was always something else, just out of sight, waiting for her to remember it correctly.

“I was just organizing these,” she said.

That felt true enough.

He said, “okay.”

Simple. No pressure. That was good. Pressure made it harder to think. Or maybe it didn’t—it just made the thinking louder.

Loud thinking was no use to anybody. She’d always liked things done quietly and in the right order.

She looked past the doorway toward the window at the end of the hall.

The lake was out there.

It always looked like it was waiting for something.

Not summer-waiting. Not winter-waiting.

Just waiting.

She could almost see the marks again.

Lines crossing the ice. Movement that used to mean direction. Speed. Cold air was hitting her face so hard it made everything else quiet.

“We haven’t had much snow,” she said.

She didn’t mean it as a complaint. It was just true in one part of her mind.

In another part, she could still hear engines.

He answered her, something about warmth. About last winter. Words that floated in and out without sticking properly.

She nodded anyway.

Nodding was safer than trying to hold all of it at once.

Besides, nodding bought her time, and she had once been very good at keeping a room moving while she decided what needed doing next.

When she tried to hold all of it, it didn't line up the way it used to.

The snowmobiles, the lake, the closet, the house—sometimes they felt like they were all happening at different distances. Not wrong. Just… not agreeing on where they were in time.

"I used to know when it would freeze," she said.

That part surprised her a little, because it came out more honest than she intended.

Like it had been waiting behind her teeth.

She heard his voice again—steady, familiar.

You always noticed things before other people did.

That felt right.

That felt like something she could hold onto without it slipping.

She turned one of the hangers slowly between her fingers.

There was no urgency in the movement. That was important. Urgency made things scatter. Slow hands were better. Exact hands were better.

Somewhere in the house, something was running—water, or air, or time itself, she wasn't sure anymore.

She stepped back into the closet a little further, not because she needed to stay there, but because standing in doorways always made her feel like she was forgetting where she was supposed to go next.

And for now, not knowing was easier than choosing wrong.

Somewhere under the confusion, another worry stirred—old and familiar, the kind that had never needed words to keep its shape. There'd been so many times she'd told herself she should have noticed sooner, should have been where the children were, should have reached them before the night did.

George: The List

George bent to pick up the hanger from the floor, then set it on the bed without saying anything.

The house had gone quiet again.

Not peaceful. Just watchful.

Marilyn stood near the closet doorway with her hands empty now, as if she had misplaced not just the hangers but the reason for holding them in the first place.

He looked at her sweater and almost mentioned it. Then didn't.

There were mornings when correction only scattered things further.

"It's almost time for church. Do you want a snack to hold you over before we get to breakfast?" he asked.

She frowned slightly, considering the question as though it belonged to another part of the day.

"I already had breakfast."

George glanced at the kitchen.

Two dry mugs sat by the sink. The toaster was cold.

"Okay," he said.

She looked past him toward the window. “Maybe not.”

He went to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator.

Half a carton of eggs. Mustard. A jar of pickles neither of them liked but somehow kept buying. The milk felt too light in his hand.

He closed the door and stood there for a moment, one hand still on the handle.

“We need groceries,” he said.

From the hallway, Marilyn answered after a pause. “Do we?”

“Yeah.”

He kept his voice even. “We’re out of more than I thought.”

She came into the kitchen slowly, one palm brushing the counter as she passed, like she was checking that the house remained where it was supposed to be.

“I can make a list,” she said.

The words hit him softly.

For years, that had been her territory: lists folded into purses, coupons tucked into envelopes, sale prices remembered without effort. She’d once moved through a grocery store like someone reading music.

She grouped everything by aisle without thinking and refused to buy limp lettuce on principle. More than once, she’d turned the cart around because she’d remembered one thing and hated doubling back.

Now she stood in front of the fruit bowl staring at three soft bananas as if they might tell her what month it was.

“We can make one together,” he said.

She nodded.

He found a pen in the junk drawer after trying two that no longer worked. Then he slid the back of an envelope across the table toward her.

Marilyn sat down carefully. She wrote milk in small, deliberate letters.

Then she stopped.

She set the pen down in a straight line beside the notepad, as if neatness might help her find her way back into the task.

George sat across from her.

“We need eggs,” he said. “Bread. Coffee.”

She repeated each word under her breath before writing it. The pen trembled in her hand, and sometimes she stopped after the first letter, staring at the page as if the rest of the word had stepped out of reach.

The list stopped halfway down. After coffee, there was only the first letter of another word, pressed too hard into the envelope, followed by a shaky line that meant nothing. Marilyn stared at the blank space beneath it.

“Is that enough?”

“Probably not.”

A small smile passed through her face. “It never is.”

He smiled too, though it hurt more than it should have.

For a second, she looked like herself—not the younger version, not some recovered version, just herself as she was now, still capable of arriving in flashes.

He held still inside it.

“We should leave for church now,” he said. “We’ll pick up groceries after.”

She looked down at the list, then back at him.

There was uncertainty there. But not resistance.

“All right,” she said. “If you come with me.”

George let out something that was almost a laugh and almost not.

“I was planning on it.”

Marilyn gathered her purse, then stopped near the end of the counter.

"George."

He looked over.

She held up the envelope. "This needs to be paid."

He recognized the electric bill. "Already did."

"You did?"

"Thursday."

Her eyes went to the window on the envelope.

"It's in my name."

"I know."

"Then why did you pay it?"

George shrugged. "Because it needed paying."

She looked at him as if this were not an adequate explanation.

"You should have told me."

"I thought I did."

Marilyn frowned.

He regretted the words immediately.

"Doesn't matter," he said. "It's taken care of."

She continued holding the envelope.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Well," she said, "we don't need two people paying the same bill."

"No," George said. "We don't."

She folded the list once, very neatly, and set it beside her hand.

Then she looked at the front door as if it had just become a question.

George stood and reached for the car keys on the counter.

Getting out the door had become its own kind of liturgy: keys, purse, bulletin, the careful patience of not hurrying what could not be hurried.

George: Fellowship Hall

By the time George pulled into the church parking lot, the sun had climbed high enough to turn the white siding bright and merciless.

Marilyn sat beside him with last month's Sunday bulletin in her lap, smoothing it over and over with both hands as if it might help her remember what the morning required.

"We're early," she said.

"A little," he answered.

They were not early. They rarely were these days. Too many small things had to go right before either of them could get out the door.

Cars already lined the far side of the lot. Through the fellowship hall windows, he could see movement—women setting out trays of coffee cake, men carrying folding chairs, somebody wrestling with a coffee urn near the kitchen door.

It was the Sunday school hour just before the service, one of those in-between church rhythms that used to be effortless for Marilyn. Coffee, classroom chatter, teachers gathering materials, and children slipping down the hall before anyone could stop them.

There had been years when George hated this hour. Not the church exactly, though he would have said that if asked. He hated arriving with a headache behind his eyes and last night's beer still working its way out of him, while Marilyn moved through the fellowship hall as if she belonged to every good thing in it. The place made him feel guilty before anyone had said a word.

Marilyn stepped onto the pavement and paused, looking up at the building.

Her face changed a little then—not confusion exactly. Something softer. Familiarity moving under the surface.

"I taught here," she said.

"You did."

"Little kids."

"A lot of them."

For years she had kept crayons, tissues, and two safety pins in her purse because somebody always needed one of them. She could settle a room full of six-year-olds with one look and a lowered voice.

Inside, the fellowship hall was warm with coffee, lemon bars, perfume, and the faint burned smell of a crockpot that had been plugged in too long. Someone had put tissue-paper flowers on the tables. They leaned sideways in mason jars, cheerful and uneven.

Once, she would have straightened every centerpiece as she passed and quietly fixed the tablecloth corners, so no child caught a knee on them.

Marilyn's eyes moved across the room as though she were waiting for one piece of it to rise and claim her.

At the refreshment table, Harold was fussing with a stack of floral napkins and a silver coffee urn that looked too heavy for the card table beneath it.

Marilyn stepped toward the table as if the sight of it had awakened some older part of her before the rest of her could catch up.

She reached for the napkins. Her purse brushed the card table leg.

The table gave a startled wobble.

The silver coffee urn tipped.

A row of Styrofoam cups skittered sideways like they had lost faith in the whole arrangement.

For one terrible second, George thought the whole thing was going over.

Harold caught the urn with both hands before it slid off the edge.

Marilyn blinked at the table, then at Harold. “Oh,” she said. “Was that me?”

Before anyone could answer, she looked at the crooked table and added, dry as ever, “I always said those tables were one casserole away from judgment.”

The room laughed—not at her, but with the startling relief of being permitted to.

The line came out with the old timing, and it hit George harder than he was ready for. He could hear the wife who used to keep three casserole dishes moving and an entire Sunday school wing in line. For a second, she sounded so much like herself he almost forgot how hard it had become to reach her.

Harold steadied the table leg with his foot and grinned. “Honestly, we should’ve retired it after the tater tot hotdish incident.”

That brought another ripple of laughter, easy and communal, and by the time the room settled, Marilyn was smiling too—as if she’d not been singled out but folded back in.

George saw Marilyn's shoulders loosen at that. The room moved on. The danger passed. But the sound of her voice—so briefly, so exactly herself—stayed lodged in him.

The morning settled into order after that. Pastor Samuel Blackstone, over from Pine Haven and filling in for their regular pastor, stepped to the front of the fellowship hall with a clipboard in one hand and thanked the Sunday school teachers, nursery workers, and volunteers who kept the children's program running week after week.

A few names drew easy applause. Others drew laughter. A woman named Grace was among those recognized, standing near the back with a paper cup in one hand and the faintly embarrassed smile of someone unused to being singled out.

Then Pastor's voice softened as he asked the room to thank Marilyn Holden, the longtime heart of the Sunday school program, the one who had built its early children's work from scratch. The applause changed then—warmer, fuller. George saw Marilyn straighten a little beside him, as if some older part of her still knew what it meant to be remembered.

By the time Pastor finished and asked the blessing over breakfast, the room had shifted into movement. Folding chairs scraped across the floor. Lids came off pans of egg bake and coffee cake. Someone called for the children to wash their hands before they touched the tray

of cinnamon rolls. Marilyn stayed beside George through it all, folding and refolding her Sunday bulletin while the line formed at the tables. For a few borrowed minutes, the morning felt almost ordinary.

They ate at a round table near the windows, close enough to the fellowship hall door to feel the drift of people passing in and out. Marilyn picked at her food, then brightened unexpectedly over a slice of coffee cake. George let himself breathe. The weight of watching her never left him, but it loosened slightly in a room where other people remembered who she'd been.

When the meal began to break apart into smaller conversations, some headed up to the sanctuary. George noticed Grace moving from table to table with a shallow plastic tub braced against her hip, gathering used plates and crumpled napkins. When she reached their table, Marilyn's hands moved toward the dishes before George could say anything, as if the sight of the cleanup had woken an old reflex in her.

"You don't have to do that, Mrs. Holden," Grace said gently, setting the tub down beside the table.

Marilyn studied the woman's face.

George waited for the strain of not knowing.

Instead, Marilyn blinked, and something bright moved through her eyes. She gave a small, surprised laugh. "Grace."

"That's right."

“You’ve always been so tall,” Marilyn said. “You blocked the shepherds.”

Grace laughed. “You always stuck me in the back row in our Christmas program so I wouldn’t block Charlie. You said if anybody couldn’t see the shepherds, it would be my fault.”

Marilyn’s smile flickered, as if Charlie’s name had brushed something just beyond reach.

The sound of his son’s name moved through him with the old ache he never quite learned to brace for.

Grace set the tub down on the nearest table and reached for Marilyn’s hand with an ease that did not ask permission and did not presume too much. “You once told my mother I asked so many questions in Sunday school because I was either going to become a lawyer or a social worker.”

Marilyn tilted her head. “So, which one?”

“Social work,” Grace said. “Though I still cross-examine people when they deserve it.”

That got another flicker of a smile from Marilyn.

George felt something in his chest unclench just enough to notice how tightly he’d been holding himself.

Grace looked at him then, and her expression gentled further. “Mr. Holden. It’s good to see you.”

He nodded. “You too, Gracie.”

Marilyn continued to try to help clumsily. George felt the old panic rise—the one that came whenever someone

mistook willingness for ability. He started to step in, then stopped. Grace had already seen what he was afraid of.

Grace turned back to Marilyn. “You want to help me with these?” she asked, glancing toward the tub of plates and napkins.

Marilyn looked at the room, then at Grace, then at George.

He saw the question there.

Not where am I.

But can I do this.

“All you have to do is hand me the plates and look like you’re supervising,” Grace said. “That was always your gift.”

Marilyn’s shoulders eased.

“I did know that once,” she said.

Grace smiled. “Then we’ll work with once.”

And just like that, without spectacle, without anyone pretending the room had not changed, Marilyn walked with Grace toward the cleanup table as if memory had offered her a narrow bridge and Grace knew exactly how slowly to cross it.

George: The Good Hour

For the first time that morning, George felt something in himself ease. It helped—though he hated needing help at all—to watch someone else know how to care for Marilyn without making her smaller.

They stayed just long enough for Marilyn to hand Grace two paper plates, then begin folding the used napkins into neat little squares as if they still belonged with the clean ones. Grace only smiled and slipped them quietly into the trash before the stack could grow. When Marilyn laughed at something she said, the sound of it eased him more than he wanted to admit.

George had learned not to press a good hour into a harder one. The fellowship hall was one thing—noise, movement, room to recover. The service would ask more than she had left to give, and more than he had left to carry.

By the time George steered her gently toward the parking lot, the morning had gone better than he'd dared trust, and the tightness in his chest had loosened enough for him to mistake it for relief.

He unlocked the SUV and walked around to the driver's side. A second later, he heard the click of another door opening and let himself believe, just for that moment, that Marilyn had found her side.

Marilyn: The Wrong Door

Something wasn't right.

Marilyn stared into the car.

She knew she was supposed to get in.

George was waiting.

But the car looked unfamiliar.

Not the whole thing.

Just enough of it.

The feeling made her uneasy.

Like walking into a room she'd known her whole life and suddenly forgetting why she'd entered.

There should be a seat.

Shouldn't there?

Her chest tightened.

She hated it when this happened.

George: The Wrong Door

George glanced up.

His stomach dropped.

Marilyn was standing at the rear passenger door.

The seat was folded flat.

She had one hand on the door frame and was trying to climb inside.

George closed his eyes.

Just for a second.

Not again.

A hot flash of frustration shot through him before he could stop it.

The morning had already taken more out of George than he wanted to admit.

And now this.

"It's not that door, Marilyn."

The words came out sharper than he intended.

She froze.

A confused look crossed her face.

"But... this is where I'm supposed to sit."

"No."

George took a breath.

"No, Dear. It's the front."

Marilyn looked from the folded seat to him.

Then back again.

As if she were trying to solve a puzzle whose pieces no longer fit.

The look on her face stopped him cold.

Fear.

Not stubbornness.

Not carelessness.

Fear.

The same fear he'd seen at the garden hose last week.

The same fear he'd seen when she stood in the laundry room holding a detergent bottle, unable to remember what came next.

The same fear he'd seen when she couldn't figure out how to answer her cell phone.

George's anger evaporated.

Not because the situation wasn't hard.

But because he suddenly saw it from her side.

She wasn't trying to make his life difficult.

Life had become difficult for her.

George crossed to her before she could try again.

“Hey,” he said, softer now.

She still had one hand on the frame, knuckles pale with effort. Up close, he could see the uncertainty in her

face—not defiance, not stubbornness. The look of someone who knew the world had shifted and was trying not to let anyone see how much.

He put his hand over hers where it rested on the metal. Not removing it. Just joining her there first, as if they were deciding together what this door was for.

“Come on,” he said. “You ride up front with me.”

Her eyes lifted to his. He saw the moment she searched his face for embarrassment, impatience, some sign she’d failed a test she’d not known she was taking.

He kept his expression easy and reached for her hand instead.

Her fingers were cool from the wind outside the store. He closed his hand around them and led her along the side of the SUV, slowly enough that she would not feel hurried.

At the front passenger door, he opened it wide and waited until she grasped the grab handle and tried to get into the car.

“There you are,” he said.

She looked at her seatbelt, then at him again, and something in her face loosened. “Oh,” she said, almost under her breath, as if she’d finally found the missing step in a staircase.

She tried to sit, but the motion caught halfway. One hand gripped the door frame, the other reached blindly, and for a moment her body seemed unsure how to fold itself into the car.

George helped her settle into the seat. He saw her sweater missed a button somewhere in the middle, the knit drawn slightly askew across her chest.

“Hold on a second,” he said, soft enough it wouldn’t sound like a correction.

He should have fixed it before they ever walked into church. He’d seen it at the house and let it go, telling himself there were bigger things to manage—as if failure came in sizes that mattered.

She looked down, then back at him, uncertain but still. He slipped one button free and worked it back through the right hole, then the next, his fingers slower than they used to be. The wool was warm from her body. He could feel the small rise and fall of her breathing beneath his knuckles.

She’d always been exact about herself. There were safety pins in every purse she owned, a compact in the glove box, and a habit of checking a collar by touch before she got out of the car. Even after a night at the speedway, smelling faintly of gasoline, she’d never looked careless.

In those years, this would have embarrassed her. She might have laughed it off, then fixed it fast, cheeks pink at having let herself go uneven in public. Now she only watched him with that searching look, still and uncertain beneath his hands.

“There,” he said when the front of the sweater lay straight again. He smoothed it once with the flat of his

hand, not lingering, just enough to set it right. “That’s better.”

“I used to notice this,” she said quietly. Her eyes lowered.

Her mouth softened. Her shoulders let go a little.

The smell of her sweater rose faintly between them—lavender detergent, the hand creams she’d used for years, something warm and familiar that struck him with the force of decades.

He was twenty-four again, standing at the chain-link fence of the Aitkin County Speedway on a Friday night, the air thick with gasoline and summer dust. The heat had not broken even after sunset. Engines shook the ground beneath his boots.

She’d climbed out of the car then with her helmet tucked under one arm, wiping a streak of grease from the inside of her wrist, laughing at something one of her pit crew had shouted. Alive in a way that made everything around her look half-finished.

He remembered the way she’d spotted him watching and walked over without hesitation, still carrying all that noise and heat with her. “If you’re going to stare,” she’d said, smiling, “you could at least buy me a lemonade.”

He’d bought the lemonade. Then another. Later that night, they sat on the hood of his truck under the fairground lights, her racing gloves beside her, talking until the loudspeakers went silent and the moths began circling the bulbs. She told him her favorite part of the

race was the second before the green flag, when everything narrowed, and the whole world became one clear line forward.

He'd not told her that night that he knew he was already in trouble. That he loved her before she finished the sentence. Loved the steadiness under all that speed. Loved that she knew exactly where she was going.

Now he clicked her seat belt into place with one hand and rested the other lightly on her shoulder for a moment longer.

Marilyn's hand came up and covered his.

Not by accident. Not searching.

She laid her palm over his as if it belonged there, as if her body remembered what the mind sometimes could not.

The story continues...