

Pushing up Daisies

Chapter 1

“I know where my husband’s buried.”

Jen smiled at her elderly neighbor. “I bet you go to the cemetery to visit him.”

“Oh, he ain’t in no cemetery.”

Jen choked, tea shooting up her nose. “That’s your secret?” she rasped, grabbing a napkin. When she suggested sharing secrets over afternoon tea, she’d never expected this.

Millie nodded exuberantly, a pleased smile spreading across her face. Eyes that had been clouded a moment ago now sparkled with unsettling clarity.

Jen swallowed. “Where is he?”

Millie leaned in. “That’s the secret part.” She giggled. “I ain’t told no one since it happened. Maisie Daisy told me not to.”

“Maisie Daisy,” Jen echoed, glancing at the empty chair beside Millie.

Earlier, when Millie’s home aide, Kate, had dropped her off, she’d asked Jen to set a place for Maisie Daisy—Millie’s imaginary friend. It had seemed odd, but Jen knew little about caring for someone with dementia. Inviting her elderly neighbor over for tea might have been a mistake. Still, Jen wanted to settle into her new life, and meeting the neighbors felt like the right place to start.

Millie sipped her tea, pinky raised as if she were attending a garden party. A pink hat with bobbing flowers perched on her head, and a pair of white gloves lay neatly beside her plate. Her soft white hair curled at her temples, and wisps brushed her shoulders.

“She’s very sensible,” Millie said. “Maisie Daisy’s been tellin’ me what to do and say since we were kids. She’s older by three minutes.”

Jen frowned. Millie was awfully specific about her imaginary friend.

“And Maisie Daisy said it was okay to tell me?”

Millie shrugged. “You told me your secret,” she said, smiling sweetly. “So, it was only fair.”

This was not what Jen had expected when she’d suggested they be friends. Friends who shared secrets.

Her own secret was mild by comparison. She’d admitted moving to Harrisburg to start fresh, to leave a messy past behind. She hadn’t expected Millie’s secret to sound like a confession to murder.

“I love secrets,” Millie continued, stirring her tea. “Maisie Daisy and I got lots of ‘em.”

Jen nodded, wishing she’d never mentioned the word. It was hard to tell what was real, and the more Millie shared, the less certain Jen became that she wanted to know.

“I’m just gonna eat Maisie’s cookie,” Millie announced, reaching across the table and plucking the treat from the untouched plate. “She don’t mind. She never had much of a sweet tooth.”

“I guess imaginary friends don’t eat much of anything,” Jen said—then instantly regretted it. She held her breath, bracing herself. Should she have said Maisie was imaginary?

Millie waved her hand, frowning as if something didn’t quite add up. “Never mind.” She began singing “I’m a Little Teapot” and poured more tea into her cup.

Jen released a slow breath. Best to avoid the topic of Maisie altogether. She searched for safer ground—weather, recipes, the kind of small talk that didn’t trip wires. She should have asked Kate for guidance. Instead, she chose a subject she hoped would anchor Millie in the past.

“So,” Jen said lightly. “Tell me about your husband. What was his name?”

Millie's smile vanished.

"Husband?" She shook her head. "I ain't got no husband, and if you know what's good for you, you won't ever have one neither."

"But you just said—"

"I ain't sayin' nothin'." Millie shoved back her chair. "I'm goin' home now." She snatched her sweater from the back of the chair and headed for the door.

"Wait—please." Jen scrambled for a distraction. "I have a deck of cards. We could play."

Millie stopped, head tilted, listening—as if to someone standing just behind Jen.

"I like cards," she finally said, letting her sweater slip to the floor.

Just like that, the storm had passed.

Millie sat back down and pushed the plates aside to make room. Jen dealt the cards carefully, her nerves humming. She talked about—her childhood cat, her best friend Sheila, singing in the Christmas show when she was ten. Safe subjects. Neutral ground. Anything to keep the focus off Millie's past.

They were midway through their second hand when a knock sounded.

"Come on in," Jen called.

Kate stepped inside, smiling. "Looks like you two have been having a good time."

"We been playin' cards," Millie said proudly. "I like cards."

"I know you do," Kate said gently. "But it's time to head home."

Millie's brows knitted together.

"I've made your favorite tonight," Kate added smoothly. "Mac and cheese."

Millie shot to her feet, cards scattering across the floor. "I like mac and cheese."

Kate winked at Jen. “I always plan something she likes when it’s time to transition her. She doesn’t handle change well.”

Jen handed Millie her sweater. “Does she talk about Maisie Daisy often?”

“Oh, sure. They’re best friends. Aren’t you, Millie?”

“Me and Maisie,” she sang, swaying. “She’s a daisy.” She stopped and fixed her gaze on Jen. “Her roots go deeper than anyone knows.”

Jen looked toward Kate, who gave a small, weary smile. “You just never know where the memories will take her.”

Jen wasn’t sure she liked where this one had gone.

She pulled Kate aside. “Did Millie have a husband?”

Kate lowered her voice. “She’s never mentioned one, and I’ve never seen any photos. So I’d guess no—but don’t hold me to that.” She hesitated. “She does seem well off, though. I’m paid monthly through a lawyer’s office. Same with the weekend girl.”

“Are we goin’ to get mac and cheese or not?” Millie said. “I ain’t got all day.”

Jen glanced at Kate. “She gets upset easily.”

“It’s the disease,” Kate said softly. “Some days, she’s a pleasant four-year-old who wants to play. Other days, she watches crime shows for hours. Evenings are the hardest. Like any child—she gets cranky near bedtime.” Kate helped her put on her sweater. “Was she being difficult today? I thought she’d be okay. The morning started out really well. She was,” Kate hesitated, “—present.”

“Hey—quit flappin’ your jaws,” Millie snapped. “I’m leavin’.”

She yanked open the door, and Kate hurried after her.

“Thanks for doing this,” Kate called over her shoulder. “I know she enjoyed it.”

Millie stopped at the end of the walk and turned back. “Don’t worry,” she called. “Your secret’s safe with me.” She hesitated, then added, almost thoughtfully. “And I know mine’s safe with you.”

She flashed a big, childlike grin—sweet, confused, harmless. As she shuffled away, she began to sing “Jack and Jill,” her frail voice softly fading.

Jen stood where she was, watching until Millie disappeared, the lilting rhyme hanging in the air.”

She closed the door and leaned against it, her heart pounding.

Millie’s words echoed in her mind.

I know where my husband’s buried.

Had Millie shared a secret rooted in truth—or one as imaginary as Maisie Daisy?