

## Playing House

### CHAPTER I

*“We are all broken...that’s how the light gets in.”* Ernest Hemingway

The laughter woke her—a child's laughter, high and clear, echoing through an empty house. Claire jolted awake, her head pounding like a drum, the remnants of last night’s indulgence still clinging to her. As she swung her legs over the side of the bed, a wave of heat washed over her, igniting a familiar but unwelcome sensation—hot flashes. She sat up, the sheets sticking to her skin as the heat enveloped her, sharp and disorienting.

She stood up, pausing as the pounding in her temples reminded her of her old friend—regret. Monday, she thought. *A new week, a new start.* The promise had become a ritual of its own, whispered each time she’d sworn off the evening’s last drink. But it was always the same. Another glass, another night lost to the haze.

Each night, Claire justified her drinking as a way to escape the drudgery of life itself. The daily grind at her job was stifling—each task blending into the next, leaving her feeling invisible and unappreciated. Then there was the emotional tax of being a mother and wife—the constant demands, the guilt of never being present enough. It all weighed on her, felt like too much to bear. She had once dreamed of a career that ignited her passions and a family life filled with warmth and connection. But now, everything felt like a series of obligations—mundane, suffocating, and inescapable.

“Just one more glass,” she’d tell herself, as the day’s frustrations melted away in the warmth of the alcohol. But one glass often led to three or four, until the edges of reality blurred. She would laugh at jokes that no longer felt funny and participate in conversations that she wouldn’t remember by morning. In those moments, the weight of her responsibilities seemed to disappear—only to return heavier than before, leaving her empty and ashamed.

Despite the pounding headache that throbbed behind her eyes and the taste of stale regret lingering on her tongue, it was a still morning—the kind that felt too quiet, amplifying her discomfort. She stood, unsteady at first, then padded barefoot to the kitchen, trying to piece together the day ahead. The coffee maker sputtered to life, its familiar gurgle a poor substitute for the sounds that once filled this space—cartoons playing too loud, off-key humming as he made pancakes.

Claire pushed the memories away, as she always did. As the coffee brewed, Claire stepped onto the back porch, the air outside cool against her skin. The fog of her thoughts began to lift—until her gaze drifted, once again, to the house across the street.

It loomed, as it always did—the only two-story on the block—tall and dark, its upstairs windows staring down like unblinking eyes. A shadow across the street. The windows were dark today, just as they had been for weeks, yet they still seemed to watch her. Claire squinted at the house, drawn to it despite herself. There was something unsettling about it, as if it wasn't just a house, but something more—something aware. She shook her head to rid herself of such irrational thoughts.

She wasn't a fan of the view. Her backyard had been her sanctuary, with a towering 11-foot privacy fence keeping the world at bay. But severe storms that spring had brought the fence down. The replacement, a mere 6-foot barrier, felt like an insult to the fortress she once had. Now, instead of her private haven, it felt like the world had a front-row seat to her life—and not just any world, but *that* house across the street.

A flicker in the window caught her attention. A shadow, moving swiftly across the upstairs room. Claire's heart stuttered. She blinked, unsure if she had really seen it. A shape—no, a shadow—moving swiftly across the upstairs window. She swallowed hard and hurried back inside. *Had someone been watching her?* Or had it simply been her imagination, twisted by the fog of last night's drinks?

She forced herself to look away, to dismiss it as a trick of the light—or perhaps, a lingering dream. But the unease lingered. Stepping back inside, the door clicked shut behind her, leaving the house across the street to watch. And wait.

As the morning light began to filter through the window, Claire sat down at the table, staring into her cup of coffee. Dustin appeared in the doorway, his presence dragging her back to reality. He leaned against the doorframe, watching her.

“What is it with you and that house?” he asked.

“It's nothing,” she replied, too quickly.

## CHAPTER II

*It happened again last night—the damn lights across the street! At first, I thought it was a coincidence, a fluke, but now I'm certain it's not! I know I sound paranoid, maybe even a little unhinged, but someone is watching from that house! Dustin and I fought about it again this morning. He blames the alcohol, and he's not wrong. I can't deny that drinking has played its part in this spiral. We both agreed to stop, and deep down, I know that this nightly ritual is no longer a harmless indulgence. The price we pay comes in the form of headaches, arguments, and frayed nerves. But this—this isn't just about the drinking. I know what I saw. This isn't some perimenopausal hallucination or alcohol-fueled paranoia! Every night, I turn on the back porch light. Last night, when I flicked it on, I watched the upstairs windows of that house across the*

*street spring to life—instantly! No delay, just an immediate reaction. When I turned off the light, their lights blinked off too. I stood there, testing it, flipping the switch on and off again and again. Each time, without fail, that house mirrored me, as if it were playing a sick game, mocking me. I've driven by twice this week; no one lives there—no cars, no visitors—and that For Sale sign still stands in the front yard. No one's supposed to be in there! I can't explain it, and honestly, I'm starting to doubt my sanity. But at the same time... I know I'm right. And I think that's what scares me the most.*

Claire snapped the diary shut, her fingers trembling as she set the pen down. Taking a deep breath, she tried to shake off the creeping dread that had followed her from the moment she woke up, drenched in sweat and tangled in sheets after another restless night. Her body felt like a battleground—head pounding, muscles tense from dehydration, and those ever-present hot flashes coursing through her like an uncontrollable internal fire. But it wasn't just the physical discomfort that gnawed at her; it was that house across the street. The way it seemed to mimic her movements, as though it were alive, watching her every action.

Her thoughts were fractured, flickering between the argument with Dustin and the shadows cast by the house. Dustin had been calm, as usual. His eyes had that mixture of concern and frustration, an expression Claire had grown used to over the years. But it stung more now.

*You're not here, Claire.* The words echoed. They felt like a judgment passed from someone too tired to keep trying.

Claire exhaled, running a hand through her tangled hair, eyes scanning the kitchen aimlessly. The daylight seemed too bright, too sharp. The sound of footsteps snapped her from her thoughts. Dustin entered the room, carrying the weight of another unfinished conversation.

“We need to talk about Audrey.”

Claire's heart tightened. She wasn't ready for this.

“What about her?” she asked, forcing calm into her voice, though her mind raced.

“She's been... distant.” Dustin's tone was deliberate, measured. “She's asking why you don't spend time with her anymore, why you're always somewhere else.”

Claire could feel her chest tighten as the weight of guilt settled in. It wasn't just Audrey who was pulling away; it was *her*. She was slipping into a shadow of herself, a stranger in her own home.

“I'm trying, Dustin,” Claire whispered, but even as she said it, the words felt hollow.

That afternoon, Claire found herself sitting in the school counselor's office, the sterile atmosphere amplifying the anxiety swirling in her chest. The fluorescent lights cast harsh

shadows across Claire's face as she sat rigidly in her chair, watching Audrey clutch her fidget cube.

"Mrs. Bennett," the counselor began, then corrected herself. "Claire. We need to discuss some concerns Audrey shared during our session."

Claire flinched at the formal name—she wasn't Mrs. Bennett, would never truly be Mrs. Bennett. Just Claire, trying to fill shoes that didn't fit.

"Audrey has expressed feeling... replaced," the counselor continued, her voice gentle but firm. "She mentioned wanting to run away, and she's developed quite a detailed plan."

Claire's stomach twisted. "Replaced? Sweetheart, no one could ever—" She stopped, realizing her mistake as Audrey's fingers tightened around the toy. "I'm not trying to—" Claire's voice cracked. "You're your own person, Audrey. I just want us to be..." Family, she wanted to say, but the word stuck in her throat.

"Want us to be what?" Audrey's voice turned sharp. "Perfect? Like those story books about happy blended families? It's fake, Claire. You're not even here half the time."

The counselor leaned forward. "Audrey, can you tell Claire specifically what makes you feel this way?"

"Because you never talk to me, you never ask," Audrey said. "You just decide things. Like you're directing a play and we're all supposed to follow your script."

The counselor nodded, her gaze sympathetic yet penetrating. "It sounds like there's a lot of pressure on both of you."

Claire's breath hitched, the weight of her detachment suddenly too much to bear. "I know I'm not the mother I should be," she admitted, her voice cracking under the strain. "I just wish I could be better for you."

As they left the school, the echo of laughter resonated down the empty hallway—high, wild, and unsettling. Claire froze mid-step. "Did you—" Claire started to ask, but Audrey was already three steps ahead, her backpack swaying, completely unfazed.

The laughter came again, closer this time, intertwining with words that sent a chill racing down her spine: "I see you, Claire. Do you see me?"

Claire grasped Audrey's hand, pulling her close as panic surged within her. "Did you hear that?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Audrey looked up, confusion shadowing her features. "Hear what, Claire? Are you okay?"

A lump formed in Claire's throat, the weight of unspoken fears heavy on her chest. "Never mind," she said, forcing a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Let's just go home."

They walked to the car in silence, but Claire felt it following them—whatever it was that lived in that space between truth and lies, between the mother she pretended to be and the broken woman she really was. The setting sun painted long shadows across the parking lot, and in each one, she thought she caught a glimpse of a small figure watching, waiting, knowing.

### CHAPTER III

That night, Claire stood on her back porch, whiskey glass trembling in her hand. The house across the street loomed through ribbons of fog, its windows like dark eyes studying her every move. The familiar shapes of the neighborhood transformed into shadows, echoing the uncertainty in her heart. In that moment, she felt like a ghost, haunting her own life.

"Just to steady my nerves," she whispered, lifting the glass. But the whiskey hit her tongue like copper pennies, tasting of memories and regret. Each sip pushed her further from shore, into waters where reality rippled and distorted like a broken mirror.

*Thump.*

The sound cut through the fog—sharp, distinct.

*Thump. Thump.*

Claire gripped the back porch railing, knuckles white. Through the haze, a small figure stood in the middle of the street. A figure, bouncing a white ball in perfect rhythm. *Thump. Thump. Thump.* Each bounce matched Claire's heartbeat, a synchronized dance of past and present.

Claire drained her glass, hoping the burn would ground her. Instead, the world tilted sideways, the house across the street stretching impossibly tall, its windows multiplying like fractals. The figure was gone, but the ball continued bouncing, invisible now. *Thump. Thump. Thump.*

"Stop it," Claire hissed, pressing her palms against her ears. But the sound had crawled inside her head, echoing in the spaces where certainty used to live.

Her hands moved of their own accord, unscrewing the whiskey bottle. The sharp smell cut through the fog, promising relief, promising forgetfulness, promising lies. She didn't bother with the glass this time. The liquid burned going down, and the world blurred at the edges, but still that house watched. Waiting. Knowing.

*Thump.*

"I see you too," Claire said to the darkness, her voice strange in her ears. Was she swaying, or was the porch tilting beneath her feet? The house seemed to pulse now, its windows flickering with impossible light. Then, a laugh—or was it crying?

*Thump. Thump.*

She stumbled down the front porch steps, the bottle dangling from her fingers. The fog parted before her like a curtain, leading her toward that watching house. Each step felt both deliberate and dreamlike, as if she were floating just above the ground.

"I have to know," she mumbled, the words slurring together. "Have to see... have to make it real."

The house grew larger with each step, its windows now blazing with an inner light that seemed to reach for her, calling her home. Or was it warning her away? The distinction didn't matter anymore. She was too far gone, tumbling down the rabbit hole of her own making.

With liquid courage propelling her forward, Claire stumbled across the street. The world tilted and swayed around her as she approached the front door. To her alcohol-addled mind, it seemed to swing open of its own accord, inviting her into its darkness.

The interior was a confusing maze of shadows and memories. It wasn't musty and abandoned as she expected. The walls were decorated with familiar photos—photos of Dustin and Audrey. The furniture, the layout, even the scent of Dustin's favorite coffee lingering in the air—it was all achingly familiar. Claire's footsteps echoed on bare wooden floors as she made her way upstairs, one hand on the wall to steady herself. The flickering light she had seen so many times before beckoned her from behind a closed door at the end of the hallway.

Heart pounding, Claire pushed the door open. The room spun violently, and she had to grasp the doorframe to keep from falling. Through the haze of intoxication, she saw a large, ornate mirror mounted on the far wall.

As she staggered closer, her reflection shimmered and changed. "I see you," the figure in the mirror said, the voice echoing strangely in Claire's mind. "Do you see me now?"

Claire laughed, a harsh, broken sound. "I'm losing my goddamn mind," she screamed.

The room began to spin faster, reality fracturing at the edges. Claire felt herself being pulled toward the mirror, toward the figure. Colors swirled into a nauseating vortex of light and memory.

With a sound like shattering glass—or was it just the glass slipping from her fingers? The room spun around her, and Claire sank to the floor, leaning against the mirror. Her breath began to fog

the view. Her head felt cool against the reflective glass. Her eyes grew heavy, and the boundaries between realities blurred even further as she drifted off to sleep.

#### CHAPTER IV

"Dad?" Audrey's voice filled with confusion before rising with fear. "Dad! There's someone in our house!"

Claire blinked in the darkness, her head fuzzy. The lavender scent of Audrey's room felt so familiar, so right. "Sweetie, it's me—" her voice came out thin and desperate.

But Audrey's face showed no recognition, only terror. She backed away, clutching the door like a shield. "Dad! Help! There's a woman in my room!"

"No, please, you don't understand," Claire pleaded, her voice breaking.

Heavy footsteps thundered up the stairs, and Dustin appeared in the doorway, his face twisted with protective anger. "Get away from my daughter!" he shouted, moving to stand between Claire and Audrey.

Claire struggled to her feet, her head spinning, bile rising in her throat. "Dustin, it's me—" She stopped, the words dying as she met his eyes. There was no recognition in them. Only anger and concern for his daughter remained.

"I'm calling the police," he said, pulling out his phone.

"No, please," Claire pleaded, her voice hoarse. "I'm sorry, I... I thought..." The room tilted dangerously, and she grabbed the bedpost to steady herself.

"You're drunk," Dustin said flatly, keeping himself between Claire and Audrey. "Stay right where you are. The police are on their way."

Claire's gaze drifted to the window, and reality crashed into her like a physical blow. Across the street stood her house—empty, with drawn curtains and a flickering porch light she'd left on all night. The FOR SALE sign still stood in the overgrown yard, weathered by three years of neglect.

The world spun as memories flooded back: the accident, the endless nights of drinking that helped her forget, the hours spent watching Dustin and his daughter across the street, imagining herself in their perfect life. She hadn't been living here—she had been playing house, constructing an elaborate fantasy.

Through the window, she caught her reflection in the glass. The woman staring back wasn't the Claire she pretended to be. This Claire was older, haunted, her clothes worn and dirty. How long had she been watching this family, weaving herself into their lives in her mind?

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, though whether to Dustin and Audrey or to herself, she wasn't sure.

The truth pursued her like the approaching sirens. The porch light of her real home flickered one last time, a farewell to the life she had imagined, as Claire waited for whatever would come next. The fantasy had ended, but perhaps that was what she needed all along—not to play house, but to finally face her reality and begin to heal.