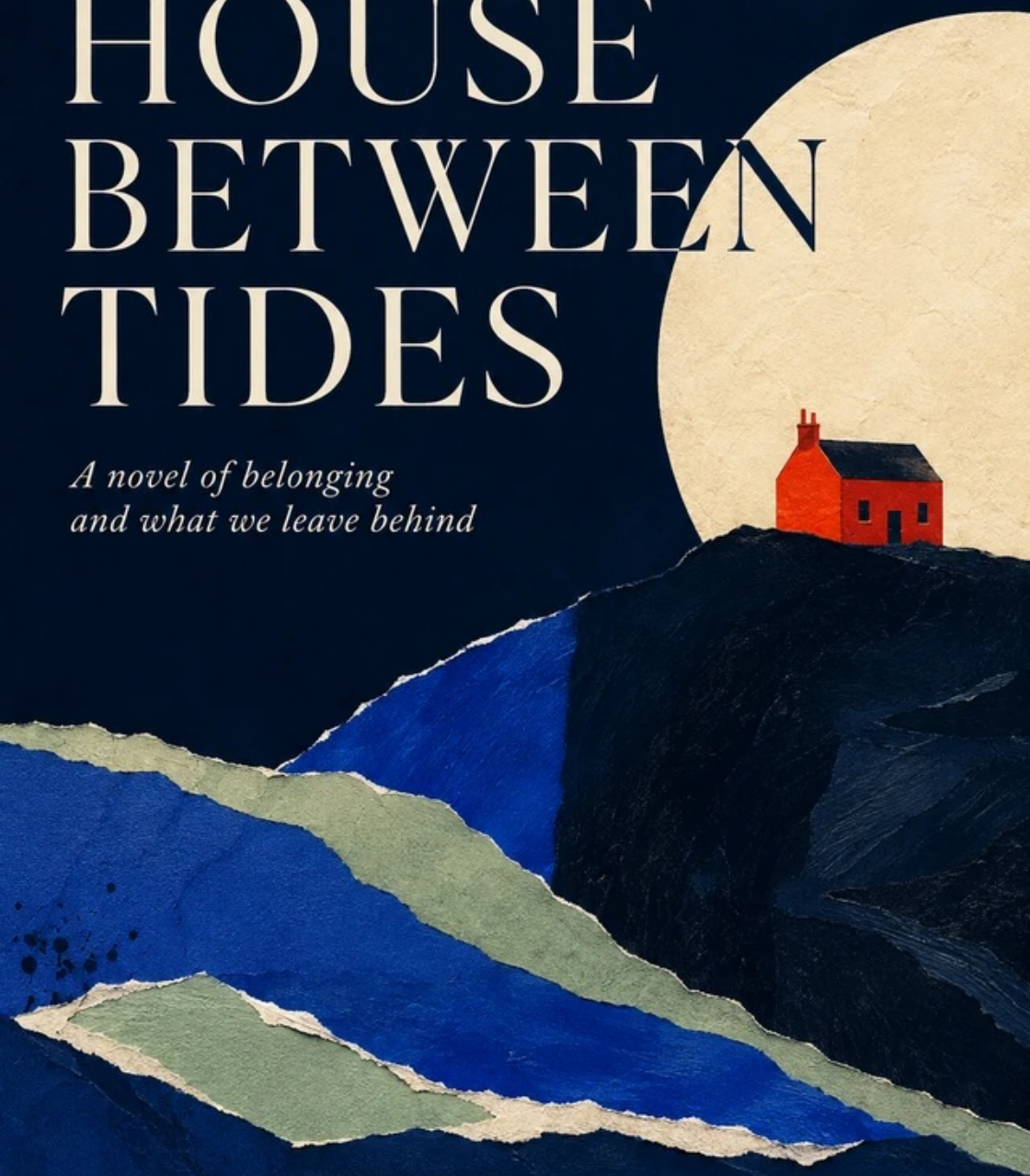


THE HOUSE BETWEEN TIDES

*A novel of belonging
and what we leave behind*



ELLA MARLOW

CHAPTER ONE

The returning tide

The key was still under the blue pot. After eighteen years, after the hospital and the funeral and the conversation in which her brother said someone ought to go, this was what unsettled Clara: nobody had moved the key.

She turned it twice. The door opened against a little drift of sand. Beyond the hall, the house held its breath in the familiar way, as though her mother had only stepped outside to take the washing in.

Clara left her suitcase by the stairs. On the kitchen table stood a glass of water, a pair of reading glasses and an envelope with her name on it. Not the careful name her mother wrote on birthday cards. The hurried one. The one that meant a train was leaving.

Through the open window she could hear the tide coming up the garden steps. Her mother had always said the sea would ask for the house back. Clara had never thought she meant it literally.

CHAPTER ONE / CONTINUED

The envelope

Inside was a photograph of the house before the extension. Three people stood on the terrace. Her mother, impossibly young, leaned into the wind. Her father held a mug. Between them was a woman Clara had never seen.

On the back, in pencil: Before we decided what to tell the children.

She sat down. Outside, a gull landed on the wall and inspected her with the confidence of a creature that had never needed permission to return anywhere.

There was no letter. She shook the envelope, then looked beneath the table, embarrassed by the small, unreasonable hope that an explanation might have fallen out.

A knock came at the back door. An old man stood there with two loaves in a paper bag. He looked at the photograph in her hand before he looked at her face. 'I wondered when you'd find that,' he said.

CHAPTER ONE / CONTINUED

What the house kept

He put the bread on the counter and introduced himself as Martin, although Clara remembered him. He had once repaired the garden gate. He had once taught her brother to tie a knot that tightened when you tried to undo it.

'Who is she?' Clara asked. Martin took off his cap. In the kitchen light, his hair was the white of paper left in a window. 'Your mother wanted to tell you herself.'

It was a sentence designed to end a conversation. Clara had heard enough of those in the past month. She turned the photograph toward him and waited.

At last he drew out a chair. Its legs made four pale marks in the sand. 'Before anything else,' he said, 'you should know that this wasn't always your mother's house.'

The water touched the bottom step. Somewhere upstairs, a door that Clara had not opened clicked shut.