

THE WLBS: WOMEN OF WHIMSY

by
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Dedicated to:

Michael and Paula Banka.

You have loved, supported, challenged, and guided me unceasingly.

Thank you.

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ABSTRACT

RACHEL ELLEN BANKA: *The WLBS: Women of Whimsy*
(Under the direction of Tom Franklin)

This thesis is an entirely fictional novel about the five members of a women's book club in a small Mississippi town. It is told from three alternating perspectives and spans the course of one month, November, 2013. It is a story of lies, literature, love, and loss; of identity, community, friendship, and betrayal; and of hidden treasure, whatever form that takes.

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Introduction

Writing Whimsy: The Journey from Short Story to Senior Thesis

At some point in the past couple of years, as I alternatively wrote and contemplated and edited and fretted over my senior thesis, *The WLBS: Women of Whimsy* came to represent two distinct stories in my head. On the one hand, of course, there is the fictional tale I have attempted to tell within the novel itself, the narrative about five women negotiating modern life in a small Mississippi town. I have already devoted over two hundred pages to that plot, and ultimately, I must let my characters speak for themselves through the product of my time and effort. However, alongside that plot in my mind, there is also the story behind the novel, which has gone unwritten until now. This latter story chronicles the journey I have taken in order to stand before a committee of three professors on April 28, 2015 and present the culmination of my four years as an undergraduate at the University of Mississippi and a member of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College. At present, I would like to use a few pages to summarize that saga and, briefly, to speak for myself:

I. Exposition

The WLBS: Women of Whimsy did not go by that name originally. Similarly, I did not conceive of the tale as a potential senior thesis or a possible novel when I first started to work on it. The first full draft of the initial piece was simply “The WLBS,” a twenty-

page short story I was writing for my Advanced Fiction Workshop with Professor Tom Franklin in the fall of 2012. It came from an opening paragraph for a future story I had jotted down and labeled “The Treasure Hunt” during the previous summer. “The Treasure Hunt” read, in its entirety:

The treasure hunt was Beth Jordan’s idea – something to break the monotony of living in Whimsy for a few weeks. The rules, as we decided them while we sipped sweet tea in Meredith Davis’ living room, were simple. The hunt would start right after our next meeting and last five weeks, one for each member of our book club. Beth would go first, hiding one of her favorite literary classics somewhere in downtown Whimsy and planting clues across town, followed by Jennifer Finch, then Meredith, then Audrey Mitchell, and finally me, as I was the newest member of our club and the most reluctant to speak up.

The core of the story had eluded me that August, so I had tucked the quarter-page away in some digital corner of my computer and presented a dark, dramatic short short story called “Lindsey” for the first of my two workshop submissions that semester instead. “Lindsey” – or, rather, my experiences writing and receiving responses to “Lindsey” – strongly influenced the direction in which I would end up taking “The WLBS” two months later. Critically, “Lindsey” was right in my comfort zone. It was, in truth, the epitome of all the fiction I had written in college so far: emotionally heavy, symbol-laden, nearly plotless, and told from the point of view of an introverted young

female with a quick but somber mind. Tom and my peers gave me mostly positive feedback on my latest offering, as they had with “The Dead End” and “Perched” the semester before. Yet I found that I wasn’t satisfied with the piece or proud of my endeavors. I knew the work was forgettable and largely unremarkable. When it came time to write my next story, consequentially, I pulled out “The Treasure Hunt” and started carefully considering the directions in which I could take it. Since I expected it be the last piece I would ever get to workshop with Tom, I resolved to develop it into something unlike anything I had written before: something long, with a stronger plot, a comedic tone, and a variety of characters with a range of voices. Thus began “The WLBS.”

I also wove many elements of my academic studies into that first draft, however. That semester, I was taking British Literature of the Romantic Period with Dr. Hannah Rigby and Junior Seminar: Literary Criticism with Dr. Annette Trefzer, whom I would later ask to accept a position on my thesis committee. The former course led me to read Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* and “Love and Freindship,” and I was so taken with the irony and biting social commentary in Austen’s comedies of manners that I decided to attempt to write a similar brand of humor into “The WLBS.” Likewise, I read Eudora Welty’s collection *A Curtain of Green* in Dr. Trefzer’s course and became highly fascinated by the way Welty portrayed Mississippi as an insular, unique, often funny, and almost enchanted place considered mundane by its inhabitants.

The two authors ended up shaping the first draft of “The WLBS” in very real ways, perhaps more than I realized as I originally penned the story. Emulating both Austen and Welty, I attempted to create a town as alive and quirky as any of its residents,

and I strove to narrate the domestic and social dramas unfolding in my characters' lives from a perspective just close enough for the reader to feel the enormous pressure that seemingly small conflicts can exert on an individual or select group of people, yet pulled back just far enough that the reader could still see the comedy of the situations and the characters that populated the piece. The resulting short story began:

It was dark along Holly Drive, except for the ribbons of yellow light that rolled out of Virginia Garrison's living room windows, bounced through her *Antirrhinum* beds, and stretched across her lawn. Dusk had fallen earlier than expected in Whimsy, and the black aluminum lamp posts that lined the streets had not yet switched on. At this quiet, in-between hour – when the marketing managers and orthodontists and computer systems engineers were stuck inching their ways out of the city, and the neighborhood kids were waiting impatiently by the doors of the local daycares – Mrs. Garrison and her guests seemed to themselves to be the only living human beings left on the block, in the world, even. Indeed, for a few moments, the five members of the Whimsy Ladies Book Society, gathered as they were around the low coffee table and empty plates, could no sooner imagine a reality full of other people than they could one absent of each other.

Beth Mueller, the youngest of the group, sat on the carpeted floor twisting a small silver engagement ring around her finger and leafing through the paperback book propped open in front of her without reading

anything. Mrs. Garrison and Emma Walters were both reclining on the creamy linen sofa against the opposite wall, and Heather Hartman posed on one of the firm paisley armchairs, her head tilted so that her soft red curls framed her wide, practiced smile. In the other chair, Catherine Fletcher was leaning forward with locked shoulders and the slight scowl she wore even when she tried to laugh.

Of course, I unknowingly built the skeleton of my novel as I wrote “The WLBS,” and I believe my original influences can still be felt strongly in the way my characters take themselves incredibly seriously, even as they embark on something as objectively trivial as a book club treasure hunt or meddle in each other’s lives for petty, self-serving reasons. As I read Austen and Welty, I found that there is both humor and tragedy in characters who reflect upon themselves to such an extent that they lose all perspective on themselves and the world around them. Consequentially, my story “The WLBS” and the novel that evolved from it are both highly concerned with focus, particularly what individuals focus on and what thus becomes out-of-focus.

Beth Mueller, for instance, focuses on her own social anxiety, which only magnifies her unease around the people of Whimsy and blinds her to the possibility that her one comfortable relationship (with her fiancé, David Holden) may not be a functional or satisfying one. Emma Walters, meanwhile, focuses on her past as she tries to construct an ideal present that will negate her former life, but she buys into her own perfect-wife-and-mother façade and forgets to examine her conscious or figure out what she and her family really need. Finally, Heather Hartman focuses on being attractive and

untouchable, the star of every show, and she refuses to admit that life in a spotlight can be lonely, inauthentic, and unendingly stressful. These elements, which are still at the heart of my novel, were already in the story when I submitted that twenty-page first draft to Tom and the rest of my workshop peers. Even then, though, I did not yet imagine that I would get to continue developing them, working with my characters, and adapting “The WLBS” for the next several years.

I. Inciting Incident

“The WLBS” would have only ever been a short story written for a college course and then tucked away with the ones that had preceded it, if not for Tom. In my mind, that was all “The WLBS” could be until the day we workshoped it in class, and Tom told me the piece felt as if it ought to be a longer work, either a novella or a novel. I had, by that point, begun seriously considering writing a creative thesis. However, a collection of short stories still dominated my thoughts. In fact, I had been settling into the idea of writing a number of stories inspired by interviews with interesting older residents of Mississippi, and I had even already conducted one such interview. That idea got tucked away, as “The Treasure Hunt” had, the instant Tom suggested I turn “The WLBS” into a novel.

I was thrilled by the idea, by the challenge, by the opportunity to gain more experience with developing complex plots and writing longer pieces. Of course, I was also incredibly pleased that Tom, my unofficial writing mentor, liked my story well enough to want a novel’s worth of it. His note on the original draft began, “Rachel – this was fun to read, with excellent characters, a town that becomes a character, and a

wonderful comic tone.” It then went on to suggest, among other things, that I make the members of the Whimsy Ladies Book Society easier to tell apart, and that I either tell the story from only Beth’s point of view or lengthen the work considerably. Obviously, I chose the latter.

After we workshopped my story in class, finally, I emailed Tom to set up a meeting to discuss “The WLBS” in greater depth. Near the end of the message, I added, “I feel I should warn you that I’m planning on asking (or shamelessly begging) you to consider being my thesis advisor. Is there any type of pastry that would be a particularly effective bribe?” He responded, “No bribe necessary. I’d be honored to be your thesis advisor,” and just like that, I was working on my senior thesis, a novel-length version of “The WLBS.” I was a first semester sophomore, barely nineteen years old, and I was writing my first novel.

II. Rising Action

I set out lengthening “The WLBS” at once, largely because Tom asked me to turn in the first thirty pages of a new draft as my final portfolio less than two months later. Thirty pages turned out to be the first three chapters, which I submitted to Tom and sent to a talented senior classmate, Merrill Lee Girardeau. Tom and Merrill Lee each gave me some feedback on the chapters themselves but recommended that I continue moving forward. I therefore kept writing, and by the end of the first semester of my junior year, I handed Tom a complete first draft. Its first paragraph was nearly identical to the that of “The WLBS.” Looking back, though, I find that that first year of novel-writing is the hardest to recall. I know I concentrated on making the five main characters more distinct

from each other, raising the stakes to create interesting conflict, and incorporating subplots. However, for the most part, my memories of the period are a blur, only resharpening at the point when I met with Tom to discuss the draft and get my now marked-up manuscript back from him.

It helps that Tom also provided a written summary of his feedback, of course. I still have it in my basket of *WLBS* materials. It says, “Works: Clearly written. Characters are distinctive. I care. Good tension, when it arrives. Good setting. To Improve: 1) Club should meet in bookstore. 2) Amp up tension by opening w/ revelation that someone is having an affair → Treasure hunt isn’t enough. 3) Cut two POVs? Catherine’s and Mrs. G? 4) Move Emma’s first trip up. 5) Move Beth’s backstory to front. 6) Town.”

I resisted the idea of cutting two points of view at first. It seemed unbalanced or unfair to give three members of the book club direct, third-person voices while excluding the other two members. Nevertheless, as I mulled over Tom’s suggestions, I began to see it as a way to get my characters out of their heads and make them communicate with each other more. Eventually, I agreed to eliminate Catherine’s and Mrs. Garrison’s points of view. Once I did so, however, I had a new challenge ahead of me: restructuring the entire novel’s plot so that certain revelations occurred earlier *and* so that all key events could be observed by one of my three remaining point of view characters. That alone took me a couple of weeks of careful consideration, and only after that was completed could I begin actually writing the second draft of *The WLBS*. I ended up making it only about eight chapters in before the start of my senior year.

III. Climax

Going into senior year, I planned to have the full second draft of *The WLBS* completed and turned into Tom by the end of the first semester. Then school began, and things went awry at once. To start with, I had at last truly overbooked myself by signing up for a full course load, accepting a promotion at work, starting applications to six graduate schools, adopting a dog, and planning such a rigorous writing schedule. On top of all that, however, my then-boyfriend of over five and a half years unexpectedly broke up with me one week into the semester. The following months, needless to say, taught me a lot about how time-consuming grief can be, how major life events can occur at the worst possible moments, and how even dedicated twenty-one year olds have emotional, physical, and mental limits. It was a painful semester, and I got very little writing done.

Consequentially, I entered my final semester of college in a state of near-panic over my thesis. I was just as busy as the semester before, if not more so, since I had foolishly accepted even *more* hours per week at work. I could no longer afford to wallow in sadness or exhaustion or self-pity, though. My only choice was to write, write whenever and however much I could. All in all, I found it a mixed experience, for as I wrote, I rediscovered the joys of working on a story, which I had lost sight of during the previous semester. Nonetheless, I also found that I had to approach deadlines with more flexibility than I was comfortable with, and I had to miss numerous nights of sleep and leave a certain number of responsibilities unfulfilled as I struggled to balance everything. In addition, finally, I had to accept the fact that I would not have time to remake my novel into everything I wanted it to be before I had to submit a version as my senior

thesis. That realization, which I had batted away for as long as I could, was a bitterly disappointing one.

Somehow, though, in spite of everything going on this past year, I recently managed to finish a second draft of *The WLBS*. These past eight months have been a test of my determination, my priorities, and my time management skills like no other I have ever experienced, but I survived. What's more, I actually did write a novel for my senior thesis. I like to believe that Freshman Me would be astonished at this feat. Sophomore Me, I know, would be inspired. Junior Me would feel liberated, relieved. But Senior Me? I am proud, and my confidence in my willpower has been renewed. For even if I have failed in every other regard – if *The WLBS* is boring, if it isn't funny or moving, if it does not contain my best writing, if my characters lack dimension, or if Whimsy seems bland – at least I know that I was able to push myself to finish this ambitious project. I'll be able to do the same in the future, over and over again, with project after project, and with each one, I will become a stronger person and a better writer.

IV. Falling Action

If I have just reached my goal of completing a second full draft of *The WLBS*, where does that leave me? Evidentially, writing this introduction, sharing my thoughts about three year process that is about to reach its conclusion. I know this section of my thesis may seem strange or self-congratulatory at times, its structure odd even, but throughout it I have aimed only for honesty and reflection. I merely hope that, with it, a reader will be able to view the novel that follows as a palimpsest, to note how each iteration shaped the current version, and to recognize that *The WLBS: Women of Whimsy*

grew out of a strange, transitory stage of my young life, one in which academic interests, personal concerns, and creative efforts cohabited in my mind, sometimes competing for prominence and sometimes complementing each other. I realize, moreover, that I was and still am too close to my novel-writing process to notice certain aspects of it. However, I have attempted to outline enough of that process here that an interested reader, whether he or she is a member of my thesis committee or myself several years from now, might catch something I have overlooked. I am certain that, for all my experiences writing *The WLBS* have already taught me, I still have much more I can learn from them.

V. Denouement

Now, at long last, for a conclusion. I believe that denouement of the story of my senior thesis will be my thesis defense on April 28, 2015. It may seem odd, perhaps, that I would consider the defense a type of resolution and not my tale's climax, that nerve-wracking moment that shall decide if I succeed or fail in my efforts. To be fair, I am sure my nerves will be plenty wracked when I actually begin my defense. However, to me, this project was always about the process more than the product, about the writing experience I would gain more than the written work I would end up with. At the moment, I cannot predict where I will be in six months or what *The WLBS* will look like in a year, but I do know that I have been on a journey for the last three years, a journey that began when I decided to turn "The WLBS" into a novel and that will end with my defense.

Chapter One

Beth

Whimsy was, is, and always will be, by nature, unpredictable.

When Beth Mueller bolted the front door of her gray, one-bedroom bungalow and set off down Fulton Avenue on the evening of November 1st, she had every intention of resigning from the Whimsy Ladies Book Society by the end of the night. No oppressive premonition struck the twenty-five year old as she strolled beneath the Maple and Ironwood trees that lined the narrow street. So, for the moment, the only surprise she registered was weather-based. Dusk was falling earlier than anticipated in sleepy Whimsy, allowing people and places alike to be engulfed by shadows next to the black aluminum lamp posts that punctuated the sidewalks, unprepared, unlit, useless.

To a quiet, freckled girl hiding in the folds of a deep blue cardigan and worn-out jeans, the premature darkness was hardly noteworthy, though. She wandered a series of roads and past shops she should have already memorized, reminding herself that she'd agreed with everything her fiancé, David Rorey Holden, had said about the WLBS not being right for her. About accepting her losses and starting over with a different, better-suited group. It couldn't be too difficult. The couple had arrived in Mississippi's favorite forgotten town scarcely six months prior. She hadn't had time to grow attached to the women, the organization, she was on her way to visit.

Beth quickly lost track of the diminishing light and the passing minutes. Soon enough, the remote autumn sun had all but disappeared behind the tidy horizon formed

by rows of indistinguishable two-story houses, and she found herself turning the corner of Main Street and Erstwhile Avenue. Her destination, a compact yellow building at the end of the next block, came into view.

As Beth understood it, the Victorian-era structure had originally been an elegant home tucked away in relative privacy but frequented by the best and the brightest-eyed of Old Whimsy's socialites. Its glory days ended, however, when it played host to one of the neighborhood's most gruesome crimes. The event itself remained a mystery to Beth, since few locals agreed upon the details of the scandal anymore, and none would dare disclose them to an outsider or a newcomer. In any case, Whimsy was a town slow to heal and slower to forgive, so the place had stood vacant for over half a century, while the nearby commercial area gradually engulfed the street.

But then things changed, as they always do. A well-to-do attorney named Steven Garrison purchased the lot as a gift for his younger, childless wife, Virginia. Mrs. Garrison had apparently grown tired of sitting in their living room all day, knitting pink and blue baby booties for other women's children. So with his money, her sticky-sweet Southern accent, and more than a little help from a community eager to bury certain aspects of its history, the lifelong native of Whimsy had converted the house into a used bookstore named *Agèd Pages*, which she'd managed to keep afloat for over two decades so far. At least, that's how everyone told the tale, and Beth had neither reason nor inclination to doubt such a popular piece of lore.

Now sixty-seven years old and fourteen years widowed, Mrs. Garrison still ran her business with minimal aid. The two college kids she employed part-time, Sophie and Elliot, each drove in from the city twice a week to restock shelves and man the register,

but that was it. She even closed early on the first and third Fridays of each month to hold meetings of the Whimsy Ladies Book Society. The WLBS, moreover, was an association she had founded herself, one that had stabilized itself at four members before Beth and David hastily relocated from Winter Haven, Florida, and set about rebuilding their lives.

Presently, a sharp breeze struck Beth's back, whipping her thick honey brown hair about her shoulders and forcing her to quicken her pace. Her long wiry legs helped her close the remaining distance between herself and the dry gingerbread structure in a matter of seconds, though her toes caught on the fractured stone path through the lawn twice along the way, nearly felling her like a power line in a storm each time. She padded up six wooden steps with peeling teal paint to reach the shop's wrap-around porch. The front door's cold brass handle felt hard and resistant in her bare hand, so the shivering young woman released it hastily and used her knee to nudge the thick slab of lacquered beech forward.

A tarnished bell chimed faintly as Beth crossed the threshold into the store's dim front room and realized, with a start, that she wasn't alone. The last of the day's dwindling sunshine was still slipping into the otherwise unlit space through two large sash windows, creating vague yellow squares on the worn floor planks. It made everything else look slightly blue by comparison, including Catherine Fletcher, who stood in the cool center of the room.

Catherine – or Ms. Fletcher, as her high school English students called her – was the tallest, most solemn, most punctual, and most enigmatic of the WLBS's five members. She was in her late thirties or early forties, by anyone's best guess, but her tight trademark bun strained the skin at the edges of her face and made it hard to tell. She was

gaunt, too, making Beth's slender frame downright voluptuous. Besides that, it was difficult to know much else about her.

When Beth entered, the raven-haired academic was facing the opposite wall, where a sticky-keyed cash register kept guard atop a scratched oak desk. The solid old thing sat on its four gilded claw feet next to the archway that led into the Children's Literature Lounge. Catherine's back stiffened, yet she didn't so much as turn around to look at Beth as the door clattered shut behind her.

"Be quiet, please," Catherine hissed. "I'm trying to listen." She jerked an almost skeletal hand in Beth's direction. It was remarkable, the way she could move a single piece of herself – her wrist or jawbone, for instance – without twitching any other muscle or bone.

Beth used the pause to steady herself. She tried to shift her weight as quietly as possible without tipping over while she waited for an explanation. It grew ever tardier, and its absence ever more conspicuous, as dust and silence settled around the pair.

"Listening for what?" Beth whispered.

"For ghosts."

"For... Excuse me?"

Not once had Beth heard Catherine mention anything as impractical as the supernatural or express a belief she couldn't support by citing three peer-reviewed academic sources. She half wondered if the woman standing before her had recently been hit in the head or fallen in love. Stranger, more wonderful things were said to happen in Whimsy, even if Beth had yet to witness it.

At last, Catherine twisted her head and shoulders around enough for Beth to make out her profile, despite the fading light. No one could deny that she had severe features; yet there was something about her shapeless business suit, her thin lips, the inward curve of her hollow cheeks, and the slight crook in her long nose that Beth found appealing. Reassuring, even. It convinced her that this crane-like lady had never suffered the constant, stinging frustration of being someone's almost-pretty best friend. She wasn't doomed to forever play life's version of Homecoming Court runner-up, and she didn't have to curse the fact that she fell short of classic beauty by a single burdensome feature. Instead, she'd inherited a concentrated dose of steel, and she wore the whole, harsh set with a similarly unflinching attitude.

"Alas," Catherine began, as she was the type of person who would use the word *alas* in a conversation in the twenty-first century, "I was on my way back to locate Virginia when I stopped to listen to this old building breathing. I suppose I lost track of myself after that. To be honest, I was simply overwhelmed by the immense presence of history in this room, and I couldn't resist musing on the ways in which a place's history could be thought of as its ghosts, metaphorically. I believe some of the great Romantics would certainly find it an apt comparison. After all, it was Percy Bysshe Shelley who wrote, 'Like the ghost of a dear friend is Time long past,' was it not? So, yes, I indulged my curiosity for a bit. Then you entered."

Beth stared in buzzing speechlessness as the other woman's mouth closed and then twisted into an unexpected smile reminiscent of cracked drywall. The speech she'd just delivered wouldn't have been all that strange coming from most people, but

Catherine never said so much at once or spoke so abstractly. Not to Beth. Not to any of the other members of the WLBS. And who else was there, really? Not to anyone, then.

“That was beautiful, Catherine. Truly. I didn’t realize you had the soul of a poet hiding behind that grammarian’s mind of yours,” Beth wanted to say, was perhaps about to say when she heard footsteps pattering toward the two of them from the back of the store. Then the lights in all the front rooms flickered on at once, reminding her that she and Catherine had been standing together in near darkness. The sudden burst of unrelenting *brightbrightbright* left them both blinking as if they’d just emerged from some sort of enchantment.

“Cath? Bethany? Is that y’all? It sounds like y’all,” Mrs. Garrison called as she shuffled into the Children’s Literature Lounge from the Non-Fiction Non-Kitchen.

Beth let her eyes slice back over to Catherine seconds before their hostess appeared. Emboldened by a thought too fleeting to be articulated or a sensation too fragile and unfamiliar to be identified, she murmured, “You want to hear something pathetic? Since I first met Mrs. Garrison four months ago, she’s called me *Bethany* about a dozen times, probably, and I’ve never had the heart to tell her that my name is just *Beth*.”

“I wouldn’t bother worrying about it a great deal,” Catherine whispered back. “I pulled her aside once to explain why I can’t stand being called *Cath*, how it sounds just like my younger brother saying *cat* with that lisp he never outgrew, but it didn’t help. As she’ll tell you herself, you can’t change Virginia Garrison, and that is a fact. You just have to step out of her way and hope she doesn’t get set her mind on changing you too much.”

Beth didn't reply, didn't dare say what she was thinking. Other members of the WLBS had mentioned Catherine's younger brother on two or three occasions, always in fettered mutters when Catherine was out of the room. From them, Beth had heard just enough about him to know that his name had been Caleb, and the reason he never outgrew his lisp was that he'd never had a chance to. He had died very young.

"There y'all are, hanging around the edges of my store and talking all hush-hush like a couple of superspies with a super secret," Mrs. Garrison proclaimed as she slid into the broad opening between the front room and the Children's Literature Lounge. "Now, you ladies know I won't stand for any of that secret-keeping in my book club."

Before Beth could sputter an apology or excuse, the plump older woman gave her guests an exaggerated wink and a ringing, bell-like chuckle. The laugh sounded like the jingle made by certain cheap Christmas decorations.

"Aww, don't look so serious, girlies! Aren't y'all going to say *hello*?"

"Good evening, Virginia," Catherine said.

"Hello, Mrs. Garrison," echoed Beth.

"Hello, hello, hello to you too!" Mrs. Garrison answered as she reached out to the pair from her position in the center of the doorway. In one sense, the tall timber archway framing Agèd Pages' owner dwarfed her five feet, two inches of thick, suntanned skin. Similarly diminished were the half-dozen or so centimeters added by her rubber-soled clogs and bottle-blond straw hair, which she teased and sprayed to unnatural heights every morning. In a less literal way, though, Mrs. Garrison seemed to fill the rectangular entrance and both of the adjoining rooms with her wide welcoming smile, generous coral lipstick, round hazel eyes, and faint but well-deserved laugh lines.

“I wasn’t expecting anyone to show up so early,” the eldest, loudest, and happiest of the three ladies said, “but you know I’m always beyond pleased to see one or both of you, no matter what time of day or night it may be. In fact, y’all can come on back to the Mystery Room and get settled in right away if you’d like.”

Beth raised her left arm and consulted her slim silver wristwatch – twice. Then she shook her wrist and did it again, thinking it might somehow alter what she saw. It did not.

“If I’m not mistaken, it’s 5:56 PM now, which means our meeting starts in four minutes,” she ventured, much to Mrs. Garrison’s apparent amusement. The older woman tossed her head gleefully and without warning and then lodged a soft hand on Beth’s upper back

“But you know how Whimsy Time works, hon. ‘Round here, it’s five o’clock until it’s six, and then it’s only five thirty. Don’t you get to worrying, though. The others will get here soon enough, if you’re patient. Or, at least, Emma will.”

“Emma only? What happened to Heather?” asked Catherine. Her eyes narrowed, as they always did when she posed a question, no matter how inconsequential.

“Nothing major. She rang the store phone maybe forty-five minutes ago to tell me she’d be a titch later than even Whimsy Time would typically excuse. I think she said something came up with that little car of hers, but it sounded like she wasn’t going to be held up for too much longer. Now, y’all just follow me and grab a pair of seats, will ya? We’ll see if I can’t coax Minerva out from under the table and maybe wrangle us up some wine.”

Mrs. Garrison spun around and trotted back into the Children's Literature Lounge without checking to see whether or not her cohorts followed her. Instead of proceeding to the Non-Fiction Non-Kitchen again, she swerved right and led Beth and Catherine through the tidy A-M Contemporary Fiction Dining Room. Past the closed door of the Romance Closet, down the *Wormhall* of Science Fiction (and Other Assorted Fantasy), and finally into the Mystery Room.

This destination was tight for a meeting of five, circumscribed as it was by the dark faux-Gothic bookcases that protruded from all but three of the eight walls. A linen-draped card table surrounded by upholstered dining chairs in the center of the room also monopolized the remaining floor space. But Mrs. Garrison loved to tell customers that her Mystery Room had once held the distinction of being the largest breakfast nook in the county. That was back when people thought of it as a fine octagonal chamber with a high ceiling, imported carpet, and a French door that led outside, of course. These days, that door overlooked a series of withering hydrangea bushes that spotted the store's fenced-in backyard. The former pride of Old Whimsy was now most notable for having a floor inexplicably lower than those in the rest of Agèd Pages.

Because of the height disparity, Mrs. Garrison, Beth, and Catherine each had to ease themselves down two angular steps to enter. Mrs. Garrison immediately dropped to her hands and knees to dive under the card table, her knees scraping against the rough, dark carpet. This was presumably, hopefully, part of an attempt to extract the store's live-in tortoiseshell cat, Minerva. However, the animal quickly declared how little inclined she was to allow anyone to evict her with a low guttural moan that Beth, who had worked as a veterinary technician in her old life and continued to do so in her new one, was all

too familiar with. She and Catherine glanced at each other and then at their feet, the posters on the walls, the fan spinning lazily above their heads – anywhere but at their hostess’s wriggling rear. Neither of them, it seemed, knew what she was supposed to say when confronted with another woman’s behind.

The pair soon overcame the scarcity of space that had so far hindered their progression deeper into the Mystery Room. Beth and Catherine both managed to ease themselves around Mrs. Garrison’s protruding posterior and take a seat to one side of her, Beth realizing too late the peril in which she was placing her feet and ankles. For the next minute or two, she listened anxiously to the artful blending of Minerva’s hisses and growls with her owner’s grunts and pleas and wondered how pretentious it would be to refer to the racket as “The Concerto of the Furious Feline.” She also watched Catherine leaf through her stiff, uncreased copy of Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*. That was the book the ladies were supposed to discuss as soon as the others arrived.

Mrs. Garrison crawled back out with Minerva suspended before her by the nape of her neck. Red-faced and streaked with swelling pink scratches, she wrestled the spitting creature toward the French door and locked her on the other side. Then she turned back to her guests and exclaimed, “I know y’all probably couldn’t tell from that little display, but my Minervy and I are just the best of friends. Honest to Jesus! If Steven was still alive, I’d swear it on his sweet, shiny head.”

“It’s nice that you still say things like that about Mr. Garrison,” Beth remarked, at the same moment that Catherine groaned something that sounded like the word *were*. “It makes me think you must have loved him a lot.”

“Oh, you bet I did! You’ve got to know, our age difference never really mattered to us. Steven was the love of my life – and the man who made Agèd Pages possible. Really, I don’t think I’d have been able to get this place up and running without his help. I mean, it’s a miracle Pages and I have lasted this long without him. If Sophie and Elliot didn’t force me to keep up with my records with their demands for compensation and whatnot, I’d probably pay half my bills twice and forget the other half altogether!”

Mrs. Garrison paused for a polite chuckle from Beth and looked at Catherine and added, “Did you say something too, dear?”

“No,” Catherine said quickly, her gray eyes serious as always. “Well, in a way, yes. Yes and no. What I mean to say is that I didn’t mean to say anything. Nevertheless, I accidentally corrected your grammar by saying *were*, for which I hold my neighbors and Whimsy’s insufficient apartment construction standards accountable. It can’t be taken back now, though, and while I wish I were able to apologize for my impudence, you *did* use the wrong verb form when you said, ‘If Steven was alive.’”

For the first time at any meeting of the WLBS, Beth laughed, really laughed, aloud. Her chortle earned her a smile from Mrs. Garrison, who had just finished pulling the cork out of a bottle of white wine, and a glare from Catherine, who gripped her glass a little too tightly while Mrs. Garrison filled it.

“It may seem humorous to you, but I can assure you it’s not,” Catherine told Beth. “I assume you had the pleasure of being woken up this morning by an alarm clock, which you had previously set to a specific time of your choosing. I did not. Instead, I was roused by my two twenty-something year old neighbors, Clarissa and the girl whose name I’ve never been able to make out, arguing again. Their apartment shares a wall with

mine, and they're the loudest neighbors I've ever had. 4:48 AM, the first thing I heard was the one who isn't Clarissa yelling, 'That's disgusting. Who the hell leaves a dish out long enough to mold? If I was your mother, I would whip you!'"

"Ah, now things are starting to make a little more sense," Mrs. Garrison said while Catherine took a long swig of wine. "Did you at least get it all down in your notebook?"

Catherine reached for the bottle at the center of the table and topped herself off. "Yes, but I changed the *was* to *were*. If I ever do get a chance to stitch all these scraps of conversation into a novel, my characters will at least have the decency to use *were* in subjunctive clauses."

None of this held any meaning for Beth, but she wanted it to. She took three quick sips from her own glass and asked, "I'm sorry, what's this about a notebook and a novel?"

"Oh, hasn't anyone told you?" Mrs. Garrison leaned forward affably and clapped both her hands to the table. Her heavy pewter and garnet ring thumped heavily against the plastic card table, muffled only slightly by the tablecloth. Beth and Catherine each winced. "Cathy here is going to be a famous writer someday, so she keeps a little journal of the things she hears to help her with authenticity."

As soon as Mrs. Garrison finished speaking, a new voice joined the conversation from the hallway: "Yes, surely you've heard about Whimsy's own undiscovered literary gem. Now, Catherine's not one to brag, but just last Valentine's Day, I caught her working on a real prize piece about a lonely sock that lost its mate in the dryer. Truly top-drawer stuff, if you'll excuse the pun. How's that story coming, anyway?"

Grinning, Emma Walters pushed her way into the room and took the seat on Beth's right, across from Catherine. Then she wrinkled her nose at the full wineglass waiting before her and slid it across the table.

"Come on, girls. You know I don't drink if I'm expecting to drive within forty-eight hours. What kind of mother would I be if I allowed myself to set such poor examples for my children?"

The other three women offered Emma greetings of varied volumes and enthusiasm, two of which were all but drowned out by the last – Mrs. Garrison's. Emma nodded graciously at each, much like a young Delta town Cotton Queen leading a Founder's Day parade from the bed of the mayor's pick-up truck. For all Beth knew, of course, she might have held such a title once upon a time, although these days, Emma vaguely resembled a younger, olive-skinned copy of Mrs. Garrison. At forty years old, the full-time housewife and mother of three was short and stocky, wore her hair in a blunt bob, and drove a silver Honda Odyssey with smoothie stains on the carpet in the back. She shared little of her past, preferring to talk about her husband and children, and by all accounts, she was a pillar of the community and a good Southern lady. And yet, something about her always brought an image of a shark to Beth's mind.

"But don't let my abstinence ruin all the fun for you single ladies," Emma said, apparently unconcerned about the fact that Beth was engaged and Mrs. Garrison widowed. "Feel free to drink. Perhaps if I could just get a cup of tea...?"

"Of course!" Mrs. Garrison leapt to her feet and rushed out of the room. For several minutes, Emma, Beth, and Catherine waited for her to return without speaking, generating a silence that left Beth's throat dry and reminded her why she was at the

meeting, about the goodbyes she'd have to issue at the end of the night. She gulped down a few too many mouthfuls of wine a little too quickly, and it wasn't long before she and Catherine had to open the second bottle. Finally, Mrs. Garrison treaded back into the Mystery Room, balancing a white porcelain tea cup on a matching saucer. She placed it in front of Emma and then reclaimed her seat.

"Now, where were we?" she asked.

"I have to say, I can't recall," Emma responded, kicking off her shoes and draining three-quarters of her tea. As she reached down to grab her cushioned seat and turn it by a fraction of a degree, her elbow brushed her cup. The delicate thing tottered in circles like a wooden top, but Emma, Catherine, and Mrs. Garrison paid it no mind. Beth, on the other hand, watched the pale pink rose on the cup's side while it quivered up and down, back and forth, as if caught in a breeze. The sight of it stirred up a strange sensation, similar to *déjà vu*, but not exactly the same – *déjà vu* in reverse, perhaps, if such a thing existed.

"Personally, though," Emma continued, "I'd love to hear more about Beth, since we have some time before Heather gets here. Wouldn't you, Virginia? Catherine? After all, she's been with us for about four months now, and we're going to be attending her wedding before we know it, but I haven't even the slightest idea of what brought her to Whimsy."

Delighted, Mrs. Garrison gasped and said, "That's perfect! Beth, would you please, please describe how you and Mr. David ended up moving to Whimsy? That would just make my night."

In an instant, Beth had forgotten all about the tea cup, though she registered few other thoughts as Emma and Mrs. Garrison began to plead and urge. Even Catherine stared at her with obvious interest, either not blinking or blinking too fast for Beth to see.

“I really don’t think that’s the best idea,” she choked out. Her throat felt like it was closing up by the second. “It’s not a story I’m dying to tell, and you guys probably wouldn’t like it anyway. You’ll just wish I hadn’t told you.”

“Let us be the judges of that,” Emma said.

“We just want to know more about you, Beth,” Mrs. Garrison assured her.

“It can’t be as bad as you’ve made it out to be in your head.”

Beth tried to resist, but the wine, her empty stomach, and the pressure from the other ladies made a more potent combination than she would have expected. She was suddenly seven years old again, holding too-big pom-poms on the side of a high school football field and trying to mimic the routine of the real cheerleaders through the pain in her ears and the rattling in her brain.

“There was an accident in Winter Haven,” she blurted out, “with David and Canens. Not that it was David’s fault, not really. I know that.”

“Who’s Canens?” Mrs. Garrison asked, already wide-eyed, like a young child listening to a fairy tale before bed.

“Canens was my darling, a black and tan dachshund I’d bought from a negligent owner for \$65 during my second year of college. To me, he was the sweetest, most loyal dog imaginable, but he had some trust issues when it came to other people, especially men. And, well, one day I was out at coworker’s baby shower, and Canens somehow got out onto the terrace. David was home at the time, so he went out and picked him up,

intending to bring him back inside. But something must have spooked him, because he squirmed out of David's arms and over the side."

"No..." Catherine murmured. "Was Canens...?"

"Canens was alright. We lived on the second floor of our apartment building, and he survived the fall mostly uninjured. The bigger problem was that someone on the street below saw the whole thing and misunderstood. Apparently they called the police as an anonymous witness to report a man trying to throw his dog over a balcony to his death, so before long, David was in handcuffs, and the story was on the front page of the local newspaper. Once that happened, of course, there was outrage among Winter Haven's animal rights activists. Even though David got released after only a night in a holding cell at the police station, people began to drive by at night to throw rocks through our windows and shout threats at us. Long story short, after a few sleepless weeks and a handful of complaints from our neighbors, it became more than clear that we needed to pack our bags and find a town where no one knew our names. So that's exactly what we did."

"Oh my goodness gracious," Emma said loudly with her hands on her face, almost concealing her mouth. "Now that's what I call a story!"

"What happened to Canens?" Mrs. Garrison asked.

It took Beth a second or two to find her voice and save it from drowning in the tears she was trying not to cry. "Canens was hit by a car and killed in front of his new owner's home, only two months after the city declared David unfit to own an animal. When we got the news, David gave me a week to wallow, and then he made me find a hobby to take up or a club to join. I chose the WLBS."

There was another moment of silence, different from any of the previous ones and humid with pity. Then the well-intended extensions of sympathy started, the same ones Beth had received from the women she used to work with, from her parents, when she'd finally been able to reach them on their satellite phone two weeks after the incident. However, the whole, morbid process was snipped short immediately after Mrs. Garrison said, "I can't imagine how horrible David must have felt," because the fifth and final member of the WLBS, Heather Hartman, materialized on the stairs at the Mystery Room's entrance.

"Beth here was just telling us how she and David ended up coming to Whimsy," Mrs. Garrison explained as she pointed to the empty seat between Emma and Catherine.

At her hostess's command, Heather floated across the room and lowered herself into the chair, posing with her legs crossed at the ankles and her head tilted in such a way that the loosest of her red curls fell forwards to frame her wide, practiced smile. Like Beth's and Mrs. Garrison's, her left ring finger bore diamond-topped band. Although its size and the harsh edges of the jewel gave it the appearance of an adult's ring worn in play by a child, the accessory seemed to have no weight and exert no downward pull on her hand as she gave one smooth, dismissive wave.

"Oh, right. The dog story."

"You knew the dog story?" Emma asked.

"How?" Mrs. Garrison demanded. All the women were sitting on the edges of their chairs now, leaning in, and at last they'd formed a true circle, the five members of the WLBS.

"That can't be," Beth said. "No one in Whimsy knew that story until tonight."

“Well, I did, but I’m not sure how. Beth must have told me at some point and then forgotten about it,” Heather said with a sharp, stiff laugh that sounded like sprinkles being shaken over cupcakes. “I mean, there’s no other way I could have known, right?”

“I guess so.” Beth said. Her gaze found its way back to Emma’s teacup as the other four women began to talk about something else, and she studied the rose’s crisp petals and shaded leaves again while she considered the matter. Finally, she gave up, still mystified. She turned her attention back to the conversation to find that Mrs. Garrison, Heather, and Emma were sighing away the last trickles of laughter, contented by whatever they had just shared.

“Now that that’s out of the way, it’s probably time that we got down to business,” Catherine admonished, her shoulders back and her fingers once again woven together and resting on the table.

“Oh, Catherine’s right, y’all,” Mrs. Garrison said. “We should have started talking about *Housekeeping* ages ago, but if you’ll let me, I’d like to push that conversation back to another time, because I’ve got a different topic I want to discuss. Is that alright?”

Their chairs were close enough to each other that Beth could feel Mrs. Garrison sit straight up in her seat with her legs extended, lock-kneed, under the table now. Without waiting for an answer from any of the other women, she clapped her hands twice to get everyone’s attention, even though she already had it.

“I’ll take that as a yes, because seriously, honeybuns, you need to hear this!” Clearly, some switch had been flipped within Mrs. Garrison. She was almost quivering suddenly, her cheeks pinking beneath her thick makeup, her chest puffed out as though she’d taken one large breath and held it. The other women waited for her to continue.

“It’s big. Monumental. It’s end-the-war-and-bring-our-boys-home huge, and y’all have no idea how hard it’s been for me to keep it off my mind all night. You see, I’ve recently had the most divine idea concerning our little society of book-lovers. So I’m just going to take the plunge and put it out there: I would like to propose a treasure hunt.”

For a several seconds, nobody said anything. Somewhere outside, a car door slammed, and a young boy whooped. It was about that time of evening when all the finance managers and orthodontists and computer systems engineers who lived in Whimsy finally got to inch their ways through the bottlenecked traffic, over the bridge, out of the city next door, and back into town, where they picked their kids up from soccer practice and daycare, drove home, and occasionally shined their headlights through windows in the back room of Agèd Pages and across the faces of the muted women within. Three such spotlights passed over Beth and the others before Emma and Catherine asked, “Wait, what?” and “A treasure hunt?” simultaneously.

“A treasure hunt,” Mrs. Garrison repeated. “Or hunts, rather. Think about it! I mean, really toss it around the old noggin for a bit. At the beginning, we could each pick a book – classic, contemporary; it doesn’t matter – and then take a turn hiding it around town. I know it sounds strange, but I just need to find a way to explain it right. Oh! Okay, I’ll give an example. Say I went first: I would buy a nice, middle-of-the-price-range copy of something none of y’all own. Then, I’d hide it somewhere safe, maybe give it to someone who could hang on to it for a couple days. In the meantime, I’d distribute clues – hints, you know? About where to find my book, so y’all could figure out where it is. But here’s the best part. After that, each one of you lovely ladies would get to search for

it, *Treasure Island*-style. The first person to locate the book would get to keep it, and then we could do it all again! Wouldn't that just be the wildest thing?"

With each syllable, Mrs. Garrison's voice grew louder by the slightest of increments, and her words came more quickly. She'd always been a fast talker for a born-bred-and-battered Southern woman. Her vowels and consonants soon began rolling out of her mouth all tangled up in one another, mingling to form a warm, creamy alphabet soup of sounds. It was soul food for the ears, in a sense, a whole bowl of it – and Beth just wanted to drink it up.

Yet Heather was first to reply, apparently unafraid of following such a dish. As soon as Mrs. Garrison's mouth closed, Heather grinned and shouted, "Ginny, darling, that is simply inspired. I love it!"

The group dissolved at once into tittering laughter and overlapping exclamations. If Mrs. Garrison's speech had been a soup, this blending of voices was a jambalaya, one that Beth found spicier and more overwhelming. Catherine submitted question after question to the others through pursed lips, while Emma competed with Mrs. Garrison to provide answers. In the meantime, Heather took to half-yelling proposals about buried books and coordinated pirate-chic accessories, although, for once, no one seemed to be listening to her. Beth alone remained quiet and still, legs drawn up between her chest and the edge of the table. In the midst of the chatter, she chose instead to whisper the phrase *treasure hunt* to herself twice – the first time to taste the bold words with her own tongue and the second because she decided she liked it.

It was that flavor lingering in her mouth, more than anything else, that made her turn to Mrs. Garrison and ask her how she'd come up with the idea of holding a treasure

hunt in the first place. She didn't know it yet, perhaps never would, but that flavor would influence many of her decisions that night. That flavor would be the beginning of an end.

"Believe it or not, it came to me in a dream," Mrs. Garrison answered. She sounded chipper as ever before.

"Really? A dream?" Emma asked, abandoning a debate with Catherine mid-sentence. Her mouth hung open, revealing a row of tiny lower teeth the color of dried white flower petals. Most of the teeth came to a slight point – perhaps the origin of Beth's shark association.

"I swear it to be true!"

"Well then, that's the best dream idea anyone's ever had!" said Heather. She looked around at the other women for support, and Emma and Beth each echoed her sentiment.

"So it's settled! We'll have a treasure hunt!" Mrs. Garrison bracketed these words with two sweeping forearm flourishes that nearly flung the last of her wine onto the floor. She didn't seem to notice how perilously close she'd come to a spill until Catherine slid her glass from her fingers and set it on the coffee table, just out of her reach.

"Alright, say we do attempt a treasure hunt," Catherine said. "My questions still stand. How do we even begin? And when? We'll need to set out the rules ahead of time. We can't just rush into something like this without knowing what we're doing."

Mrs. Garrison wriggled in her seat, straightening her back as though attempting to make herself look as tall and thoughtful and sober as possible. When she opened her mouth, she spoke clearly.

“I don’t know,” she said, “but I guess I was thinking that each of us could present the clues for our hunt at one of our usual bi-weekly meetings. Then the other four of us would have a week to search for the book, followed by another week for the next member to design her own hunt. Though, you know, now that I’m reflecting on it some, I suppose we could begin the game with the unveiling of the first clues at a special meeting in exactly seven days. It would replace our scheduled one on the 15th so that we’d have two whole weeks to find the first book and then the design week before we meet again on the 29th, ease us into the hunt life and all. Me, personally – I believe we could be ready by then, y’all. I really do. But what do y’all say?”

There was something about the prospect of a treasure hunt in this town with these four other women that Beth found alluring. She just couldn’t figure out why. It seemed silly that the suggestion could cause the same type of chemical rush as a great first kiss, so before she would admit how intrigued she was by the idea, she peered around at the other ladies to study their faces. Each of them looked pleased, grinning and nodding and concurring. They were engrossed in the little conversation being held around a plastic card table inside a ring of shelves showcasing dog-eared Agatha Christie paperbacks and coffee-stained Shirley Jackson collections, Mary Higgins Clark hardcovers with torn sleeves and Raymond Chandlers with broken spines.

For a moment, that was all of Whimsy, Mississippi: that room, those women. It was as if Mrs. Garrison, Catherine, Emma, and Heather felt they were the only living human beings left on the block – in the world, even. As if they could no sooner imagine a reality teeming with other people than they could one devoid of each other. All Beth had to do to be part of that was mimic one of the others, copy a single expression. Heather

wore the biggest smile of the four, but Mrs. Garrison's was the warmest and most inviting, so she focused on those two and tried to stretch her own mouth into a similar shape. As always, though, she found herself lacking both Mrs. Garrison's genuine expressiveness and Heather's ability to imitate it. The result was a strained curve that hurt her cheeks and made the nerves in her teeth cold. As soon as everyone's eyes had passed over her, she let the corner of her lips slip back into place and asked, "Which one of us will go first?"

"I'll do it!" Emma said, leaning forward, as if to physically reach the question before Mrs. Garrison could. Beth suspected that she'd won her positions on the Whimsy Elementary School PTA, the Whimsy High School PTA, the Whimsy School Board, and her neighborhood watch group in a similar manner. "Unless someone else is simply dying to, of course."

The youngest member of the WLBS frowned, and after several quiet seconds, she said, "Shouldn't we let Mrs. Garrison go first since it was her idea?"

"Virginia, dear," Mrs. Garrison reminded Beth quietly.

"I'm sorry, Ginny," Emma said. Her voice was tight but level. Mrs. Garrison, Heather, and Catherine looked back up, and it was Beth's turn to stare at her lap. "I didn't mean to try to take the first hunt from you if you wanted it. I only offered because I didn't think anyone else would like to go first, and you know how I *hate* to push a burden off onto someone else's plate."

"No, it's fine, Emma. Really. It doesn't matter to me. I can just go second."

Mrs. Garrison held up her hands and shook her head, showing everyone how much she meant it. Emma arched an eyebrow and glanced back at Beth. "Well, in that

case, I guess I'll just go first, and you second, Ginny. And then maybe Heather, and then Catherine, and then Beth? Is that alright with everybody?"

This time, none of the other women challenged her. Mrs. Garrison, Catherine, and Beth just nodded, while Heather leaned back in her seat, flattening her red curls against the back of the chair, and said, "Sounds like a plan to me!" So they all picked up their glasses and began brainstorming again, daydreaming about the weeks to come.

The first November meeting of the WLBS ended shortly after that, with its members disappearing back into their separate lives one by one by one. Heather was the first to leave, Catherine the second, and Beth the second to last. Only Mrs. Garrison remained, puttering around in the back, as Whimsy's newest resident stepped out into the cold air and shut the front door of Agèd Pages behind her. By that time, the streetlamps outside had turned on, though none seemed as bright as the ribbons of yellow light that still spilled out of the shop's windows and stretched across the sidewalk. Once or twice, a car slid past Beth while she made her way down the road with her shaking arms crossed against her chest, but for the most part, she was by herself. The light was for her alone. It existed for her sake, and she for its.

It wasn't until she reached the end of the block, looked back, and saw the empty street – the store and the street lamps each illuminating nothing now – that she remembered why she'd gone to the meeting that evening. The realization returned to her like reality dislodging a vivid dream. Somehow, she'd failed. Somehow, she'd gotten more involved in the WLBS instead of quitting. Somehow, she'd have to explain this to David.

Chapter Two

Emma

That night, as Emma drove home, she played The Perfect Game. She hadn't had the spare time or energy to indulge in a round in quite a while, probably a year and a half, since she was always occupied with her duties as her family's manager, a responsible citizen of Whimsy, a loyal friend, a devoted member of Whimsy United Methodist Church, and Lord knew what else. However, with her youngest, Jake, turning eight in sixteen days and an unexpected new leadership role over the WLBS falling into her lap, she was feeling both nostalgic and triumphant. The mixture, as potent as it was unusual, warmed her ears from the lobes up, and she could think of no better way to enjoy it than by entering a competition she always won.

The Perfect Game worked like this: Sometimes, as Emma returned from this engagement or that function, she would picture her perfect family waiting for her in her perfect house and try to imagine the perfect scene she'd find there. Who would be where. What they'd each be wearing, doing, talking about. Then, once she'd arrived, she'd compare. Predicting eighty percent of the details correctly meant victory for her and continuing stability for the perfect Walters family. Obviously, in the five years since she'd instated the scoring system, she hadn't lost a single game.

When Emma had started her Odyssey's engine and pulled into the narrow right lane of Josephine Avenue, the digital clock on her radio indicated that the time was just shy of 8:45, so she figured Brock and the kids could still be sitting at solid hardwood

table in the dining room, sharing stories and wishing for her speedy return in front of empty dishes. Before she even turned left onto Magnolia Boulevard by that new expensive stationary store, Looks Write To Me, the image was set. The pan of lasagna she'd left in the oven, the bowl of steamed broccoli she'd put in the microwave, and the pot of mashed potatoes she'd set on the stove next to a page of neatly-written instructions would all be scraped clean by then. Burly, sandy-haired Brock, still in his black work slacks, would be presiding over everything at the head of the table with a content smile and his hands folded over his inflated belly. On one side, their fifteen year old daughter, Casey, would be wearing a knee-length printed skirt and a cap-sleeved blouse with a lace collar, and her long ash blond braid would swing, the tail sweeping the middle of her back, every time she laughed at Jake's knock-knock jokes. Across from her, Jake and his eleven year old brother, Amos, would be taking turns entertaining everyone with puns and anecdotes as crisp, clean, and age-appropriate as their matching khaki shorts. Something like, *Why do fish live in salt water? Because pepper water makes them sneeze!* Emma had always liked that one. Pepper water. So clever.

The Perfect Game kept Emma's mind occupied even as she passed the recently laid foundation for the new Firefly Café, though she usually made a point of slowing her vehicle to a crawl as she drove down that block. In fact, every evening since the first canary yellow excavator had appeared on the lot, with the exception of that night, she briefly evaluated the workers' progress. That way, she would be able to notify the mayor straightaway if construction fell behind schedule or some untoward activity was conducted on the premises by one of those *hard hats* (her private term for the shifty, baggy jean-clad high school dropouts whom big-shot contractors always brought in from

the city to lay bricks and deflect local Whimsy revenue right over the bridge and out of town). She would capture it all on the dusty Canon film camera tucked in her glove compartment and turn the photos in as evidence, thereby averting any disaster that might set construction back another decade or two. It was her only option.

Ever since the restaurant's early years as the Butterfly Café, it had been a town focal point on par with Agèd Pages, and anyone who wished to be someone of note in Whimsy needed to be seen dining there at least once a week. After a massive kitchen fire burnt the original building to the ground in the mid '90s, and the Butterfly was hastily rechristened, however, the owners began operating out of a glorified steel garage that stubbornly poked the chin of Downtown Whimsy to that very November day. At present, it sat between the barren ground of the old Butterfly's grave and the long-awaited seed of the new Firefly, which would soon be the proper eatery in the real, brick-and-mortar structure that Whimsy so badly needed and Emma so dearly deserved after years of pretending that she enjoyed eating in an oversized soup can.

Yet even so, for the first and only time in the autumn weeks that had already slipped by and the winter weeks still to come, Emma didn't steal so much as a glimpse as she sped past, because she was playing The Perfect Game. Her thoughts were with her perfect family as she drove towards Taft Park and her home, made one last turn, and then slid her minivan up the gravel driveway and into the empty spot next to Brock's black Chevy Silverado. With impeccable posture, she sauntered up the stone path that led to the porch, opened the door, and turned to her left to face the dining room. It was empty – not a crumb on the table or a body in a seat.

“Emma? You home, sugar bunny?” Brock called, just before he lumbered into the front hall through an opening farther down and to Emma’s right, the entrance to the living room. When he saw her, Brock raised one hand over his shoulder to scratch at a scab on the back of his thick, sun-browned neck and dropped the other from the toothpick he’d been twisting between his teeth to the hem of his sweat-stained cotton undershirt, which had ridden up to reveal three inches of hairy pot-belly. As Emma’s eyes refocused on the slow-moving, La-Z-Boy-loving mountain of a man who’d swallowed the muscular, bronze-skinned, four-wheeler ridin’, deer huntin’, tobacco chewin’, skinny-dippin’ in the creek good ole country boy she’d married sixteen years earlier, she became aware of the flickering blue glow washing over the left side of his body and the high-pitched whines of her prepubescent sons arguing over which of them got to hold the remote.

Glaring at her husband, Emma scrambled down the hall and shoved her way past Brock and back into reality.

“What? No hug? No ‘hello’ kiss?” he complained from behind her as she took stock of the scene before her. All three of her children were sprawled out on her beautiful cream-colored leather sectional sofas with paper plates on their laps and their attention fixed on bright screens. Jake and Amos each faced the huge flat-screen television Brock had insisted on buying last Christmas, while Casey slumped her head and shoulders over her smart phone, which she held against her raised knees and tapped at continuously. Like her brothers, she wore torn blue jeans, although she had substituted their graphic t-shirts with a red spaghetti strap camisole that failed to conceal the wider cords of her star-print bra.

Worse yet, in the middle of the room sat an empty cardboard pizza box. The greasy delivery container lay open right on top of the 1940s mahogany and marble coffee table that Emma had scooped up for under \$200 back in the late '90s, the table that Brock and the kids thought she'd inherited from her Maw Maw's sister, Emma's dear great-aunt Beverly. Such were the depths of the savagery and discourtesy her once-perfect family had fallen to in her short absence.

"What is this?" Emma demanded, perhaps louder than necessary. Brock loped to her side and tried to take her soft, short hand in his large, rough ones, but she wriggled her fingers free and pointed at the box.

"Oh, hey, Ma. Glad you're home," Amos garbled as he gnawed on his last bite of pizza crust. Half a piece of pepperoni dangled from the corner of his mouth, threatening the couch and the blonde beige carpet around him.

"Yeah, hi," Jake added. He and his brother twisted around towards her and then back to their show so quickly that she didn't actually see their faces. She could only pray that the pepperoni had stayed in place for the whole maneuver.

Tip, tap-tap-tap. Tap, tip-tap, tip, Casey's press-on nails contributed, striking flat images of buttons and keys on a 2"x 3" pane of glass.

Over the clatter of a television outdoorsman wrestling an indignant alligator in three feet of marshy water, Emma snapped, "Alright, who here is going to tell me why on Earth, why on this great green globe that our all-powerful Lord and *I* personally put three of you on, did y'all order a heart-clogging, brain-putrefying *pizza* when I left an entire homemade dinner waiting in the kitchen?"

“Aww, calm down, Emmy,” Brock said. He had left her side after she wouldn’t let him placate her by fondling her hand, as if she were the family pet or a dim-witted cousin accidentally allowed to roam the house freely. Now he settled into the overstuffed recliner she let him keep at the edge of the room and pulled a half-empty beer bottle out of the crevice formed by the chair’s cushion and left armrest.

“I don’t think so, not until somebody gives me a good explanation for this little surprise party.”

“Mom, you seem confused about what a surprise party is,” Casey interjected, speaking up at last. She yawned, stretched her legs, and went back to whatever it was teenagers were always doing with their phones these days. Something related to birds, if Emma had to guess. For months, Casey and her friends had been rambling on about typing angry tweets to all their pigs (a term that seemed to be a new slang word for *pals* or *classmates*).

In his corner, Brock shrugged. “The kids didn’t feel like having lasagna again, and you weren’t here, so I improvised. They’re happy and fed. The mess is minimal. What’s the big deal?”

“Umm, hello?” cried Emma. “Don’t you remember what Pastor Charleston always used to say on his morning broadcast? On almost every show, he said that growing children need healthy, home-cooked meals, so that their bodies are nourished, their minds are engaged, and their sense of family and unity is reaffirmed. Lasagna at the dining room table does that, Brock. Pizza in front of the television does not.”

Brock rolled his eyes and reached for the lever that let the chair's leg rest up. "Come on. It was just one meal. They're not going to turn into felons because of it. Right, kids?"

"I don't think so," Amos said.

"Depends," Jake said. "What's a felon?"

"No, not because of dinner," Casey offered with a wry smile. Suddenly, she emitted a sound similar to a cat's cough, jumped up from the sofa, and slid her phone into her back pocket. Emma hadn't seen her move so fast since the last time one of her brothers had broken into her room and gotten ahold of her diary.

"Hey, can we just table this whole childrearing crisis for like three and a half minutes? I need your help with a school project, Mom. And it has to be you, because I already tried Dad, and that did me exactly no good."

"Now?" Emma asked, hands on hips and face angled up so she could look into her daughter's. "When I just got in? I've had a long day, you know, and believe it or not, even mothers like to relax sometimes. It's not just couch-potato children."

"Now would be best," Casey chirped.

"Uh, fine. But you're going to have to tell me about it in the kitchen, since I have to go pull a tepid lasagna out of the oven."

Casey shrugged, and together mother and child tramped back into the hallway, through the dining room, to the kitchen. On their way, they walked by at least four other objects to which Emma had attached sentimental backstories over the years, including an oak grandfather clock, a sterling silverware set, a hand-knotted Persian area rug, and a framed black and white wedding photo of strangers whom Brock and the children

thought were distant relatives. Casey hesitated in front of each one, cocking her head with an unprecedented interest and drumming her fingertips against her lips before moving on. By the time they reached the kitchen, Emma had had enough of the dawdling. She crossed to the oven, withdrew the Pyrex pan, spun back around, and asked, “Alright, what is going on with you, and why are you suddenly so fascinated by PopPop Vernon’s forks?”

“Trust me, under normal circumstances, I wouldn’t care a bit,” Casey said. The fifteen year old twisted a loose lock of hair around her thumb and tucked it behind her ear, at the same time rolling her eyes like her father had in the living room. Really, if Emma didn’t love her husband so much, she’d hate him for setting such poor examples for their impressionable offspring. “I mean, it’s not like I haven’t heard about how Great-great-whatever-grandpa had to smuggle them across like three states to keep them out of Union hands a million times before. But that’s actually what my school project is about: family history and relics and stuff. And since you’re so big on celebrating our glorious past, I thought— Hey! Are those mint chocolate chip cookies?”

Casey pointed to the pile of light green disks stacked atop a red Santa serving plate on the counter and took a step forward, but Emma slid ten inches to the right to block them from her view.

“Dear Lord in Heaven, you people didn’t even come in here before you decided to ditch the meal I spent hours preparing, did you? These have been sitting here, right out in the open, all evening! I made them this afternoon as a trial batch, because I’m planning to serve them at Jake’s birthday party.”

Casey scrunched her face together, so that her upper lip almost touched the portion of her nose between her nostrils. If Emma remembered correctly, that little fleshy bit that always itched during speeches and review board meetings and the like was called a *columella*. She'd discovered that a few years back after making a New Year's resolution to memorize one new word a day. Admittedly, her resolve had run out when she hit the seventeenth word, but as she watched her daughter's features pucker all these seasons later, she congratulated herself on her successful retention of at least one term. It brought her a certain sense of fulfillment and closure.

"Hold up," Casey ordered. "I thought Jake totally detested any food that combined chocolate with mint – or orange, for that matter. So did he just, like, get over that phase, and no one bothered to tell me?"

Emma set the untouched and aluminum foil-covered lasagna on the counter, stacked the cling-wrapped cookies on top of the pan, and carried both to her textured stainless steel refrigerator, where she slipped the dishes onto a neatly organized shelf labeled *LEFTOVERS*. As she did, she said, "You don't have to worry: Jake still hates all things mint, mint-related, and mint-adjacent, which is why these cookies won't be for him. They're so unique and clever and *green*, though. I just know everyone else at the party will go bananas for them, so I'm not going to punish the forty-five other people who will be here because my son is stuck in his picky stage. Anyway, it's not like skipping over the sweets at this one party is going to kill your brother."

"Alrighty, then. If you're not going to let me have one of the rehearsal cookies, can we please get back to the matter at hand? My school project? The one that I *realllly* need to get an A on?" As Casey stepped forward, she straightened her back, folded her

hands together in front of her belt, and widened her eyes – her favorite pose when she wanted something from her parents and sensed anger in one or both of them. Emma supposed she thought it made her look vulnerable and compliant. Innocent. Child-like. It had certainly worked well enough when she pled for highlights and when she had her eye on an expensive Homecoming dress. Right now, however, all Emma saw in Casey’s amateur performance was a mockery of Perfect Casey, who had been born and killed in ten minutes time, without ever leaving the Odyssey.

The night was turning out to be such a disappointment.

Emma exhaled through her mouth and leaned back against the counter, arms folded. “Okay, listen here: I am unbelievably exhausted from a long day of being responsible and taking care of other people, and all I want is to lie down. So please, please try to make this quick. Tell me about the huge project.”

“Great! Yeah, I can do that. Here’s the short version. The assignment is for my Mississippi heritage class with Coach Tucker. There’s like thirty students in there, and about twenty-eight of them – myself included – come from families who’ve been here in the South for, just, generations. So Coach Tucker wants us each to investigate our family trees or whatever and make some big poster presentation with names and fun facts and stuff.”

“So what’s the problem?” asked Emma. “I’ve told you enough about my side of the family to fill a book.”

That book would be a work of fiction, of course, but no one but Emma would ever realize that. There were only three other people left in the world who would recognize how little truth the story contained, and two of them – Emma’s brothers – would refuse to

read it on principle. As for Emma's own father, he probably hadn't read a single book in his adult life, not even during his prison years.

"You should have more than what you need for a school poster," she concluded.

"I know, I know. I could cover one of those huge tri-fold boards if I had to," Casey said, "and I'm well aware that in this one specific situation, your many, many boring stories have been a huge help, really. But Coach is being all hard on us because the football team sucks this year, and he's worried about his job. He said that if I want to make a decent grade, I need to include pictures of at least ten different family members."

As Casey spoke, a warm, prickling sensation ignited below Emma's ribcage, briefly distracting her from the conversation. After a second of consideration, though, she figured it was just a touch of ill-timed heartburn, nothing major. Come to think of it, that tea Virginia gave her had tasted abnormally citrusy. Unreasonably citrusy, in fact. The acid from that must have been what was irritating her now.

"And your father didn't have any you could use?" she coughed, suppressing the urge to massage her chest. Suddenly, respiration had become a self-conscious task for her, if not a difficult one. For the most part, it was just annoying (and perhaps slightly dizzying) to have to remind herself that she shouldn't have to remind herself to breathe.

Casey crossed to where Emma stood, turned around, and pulled herself up on the high counter next to her mother. Once seated, she had to angle her face down sharply to look into Emma's. "Nah, he was all, 'Your mom's the family historian. Get her to help you.' Then we had pizza, you came home, and here we are," she said.

"What exactly do you expect me to do?" Emma asked, propelling herself away from the counter and her daughter, so she didn't have to crane her neck. "Besides pictures

of your father and you kids, I've only got that one portrait in the dining room. All the other photos from my side are still buried in the storage unit somewhere."

The storage unit. As always, it was coming down to the trusty old storage unit – perhaps the most crucial of Emma's inventions, as all her other falsehoods hinged on it.

Casey grinned and bobbed in place, nearly smacking her head against the maple wall cabinet behind her. "See? That's the beauty of this whole thing. You can make one little trip out to the pod to find some pictures, and while you're there, you can also pick out some other stuff for me, because I can get extra credit if I bring in little knickknacks or heirlooms or what-have-you from like four of my grandparents or great-grandparents."

"Now wait just half a lick. Casey Lynn, we have an entire houseful of knickknacks and heirlooms and what-have-yous that you could choose from. There's probably five right here in this room, not including the gingham valance that's at the drycleaner's because *somebody* couldn't wash the ketchup off her hands."

Casey's body went limp, like a rag doll's, and she slipped off the counter, landing on her feet without any bounce. "Come onnnnnnn," she whined. "You know as well as I do that most of that stuff is either way too big or way too valuable to take to school. And the rest is kinda lame."

Having argued her case, the fifteen year old resumed her pleading pose, stopping an inch short of batting her eyelashes. Meanwhile, the smarting in Emma's chest intensified as a noose of pressure slipped around her brain, stretching from her forehead to the nape of her neck, and tightened. Prolonged exposure to a teenager often had that effect upon her. It also didn't help that she could still smell the pepperoni on Casey's breath every time she huffed and snorted dramatically.

Emma looked up at the stucco ceiling and silently counted to ten before lowering her gaze back to her daughter.

“Let me get this straight,” she said. “You want me give up a whole day to make an extra, unscheduled drive to Maw Maw’s storage unit because you need some pictures, and you don’t like any of the precious birthrights you have right here in your own home?”

“Yep!” Casey said. Instantly, she seemed to regain her pep and elasticity. Even her skin looked brighter than it had moments before.

Emma suspected that the same couldn’t be said about hers, however. Not now that her own fictional refuge was being used against her. Only two weeks had passed since her last trip, and she’d need two more before she was ready for another. Supposedly located three counties away from Whimsy, on the edges of Skunk Suburb (as the dusty ruins of Emma’s grandmother’s hometown were not-so-affectionately called), the pod bought Emma the longest drive in any direction she could stand to make every four weeks. Anything else would be too short.

After all, the self-storage story had begun years ago as an excuse to escape her husband and infant daughter for one day each month, while Emma took care of her personal needs without anyone knowing. The only thing she had to do was tell her family she was slowly clearing the unit of everything her supposedly dear, departed grandmother, Maw Maw, had left on this earth, and the questions went away. Every dusty dish or chair she brought home from her trips became a beloved piece of Emma’s heritage, as she accumulated more and more stories about her perfect childhood. That way, no one spotted the gaps that cropped up in the years following her mother’s death,

her father's imprisonment, and Maw Maw's arrival. No one noticed when she skimmed right over the stingy, rigid, contemptuous elderly woman who'd raised her.

Thus, Emma Walters's history, and the reality she'd been building from it for the past sixteen years, literally depended upon an imaginary storage pod.

"Fine," she said at last, her chest deflating like a balloon as she released air she'd trapped in her lungs without realizing it. "I will give up my Saturday and go out there tomorrow morning. Are you satisfied?"

Casey yelped, delighted, and threw her arms around Emma. "Oh my goodness, yes! Completely! You're the best mom. Thank you so much! I love you!" Then, just as quickly, Casey spun back around, snatching her phone from her pants pocket in mid-twirl, and sprang out of the room, leaving Emma to listen to the receding sound of bare feet slapping against wood flooring as Casey skipped through the dining room and back into the hallway.

An hour later, after she wiped all evidence of chain store deliver pizza from her house and sent her children to their rooms, Emma retreated to her and Brock's bedroom, where she lay down on top of their silky burgundy comforter, propped her size six feet up on a throw pillow, and covered her eyes with both hands to block out all light and ease her throbbing head. Once again, it was she – the devoted, loving, selfless wife and mother – who had to suffer for her family's health and happiness. Wasn't that just always the way?

The instant Emma's breath began to slow and shallow out, the landline phone on the end table next to her rang, piercing the air and shattering her budding calm.

Apparently, Brock had turned the volume all the way up again. Biting back a curse, Emma snatched the receiver out of its cradle before it could sound again and groaned before lifting it to her ear.

“Umm, so, what was that tonight?” Heather demanded on the other end of the line. Immediately, Emma’s eyes popped wide open, and the pain in her head lessened.

“You mean the treasure hunt thing?” she returned eagerly, thankful for a reason to send her thoughts back to the earlier half of the night. “As far as I’m concerned, it’s exactly the type of loony idea Virginia would come up, but I think it has the potential to raise our little club’s profile, to get Whimsy talking about the WLBS. If it’s in the right hands, of course, which it is now that I’ve taken the lead.”

“Sure, sure. But I meant with Beth. Did I miss something, or are we still a crowd of five?”

“Right! Beth. I almost forgot she was supposed to resign tonight. Well, I guess that’s another annoying loose end that still needs tying up.”

“No kidding. My source said he was certain it’d be tonight, like literally five minutes before the meeting, and then what? She changed her mind? What are we supposed to do with that?”

During the brief pause, Emma could almost hear Heather twisting one of her spectacular red curls back into formation. To the best of her knowledge, she was the only person allowed to see such efforts on her closest friend’s part. It would surprise her, in fact, if even Christopher could deny with certainty that Heather kept her appearance polished and perfect all day through sheer will alone. *Never let the audience peek behind the curtain*, Heather had told her on more than one occasion, as she straightened her lip

liner or shaded her brows in the compact mirror resting in her palm. That made Emma Heather's assistant stage manager, she supposed.

“Ah, yes, your source,” she said, holding up her left hand and stretching her fingers apart so she could examine her cuticles. “That would be your new auto mechanic, right? The one who got your car running again tonight? You know, Brock's not going to be happy when he hears you abandoned his shop for some nameless, faceless competitor.”

Heather groaned playfully and, in a tone bordering on sing-songy, asked, “What can I say? I wasn't expecting my car to break down tonight, so I didn't have much time to think. Give me a pass on this one, won't you?”

“Don't I always?” Emma said.

“That you do.” At this, the two women laughed together, effortlessly.

Emma knew that, at first glance, she and Heather struck others as an unlikely pair. After all, Emma had nearly a decade of age and quite a few inches of waist on Heather, who in turn beat her in height, style, and poise. While Heather's dark blue eyes and bright hair created a striking, artful contrast against her even ivory skin, Emma's russet hair, olive skin, and mud brown eyes all ran together. Moreover, whereas Heather could still proudly flaunt the belly ring she'd worn until her thirtieth birthday if she wanted, stretch marks, pink and brown, raced along Emma's own soft midriff. An unlikely pair, indeed.

Yet, somehow, Heather was the closest thing to a sister Emma had ever had. They'd bonded five years ago, during the eight months Chris and Heather, still newlyweds then, had lived in the house next to Emma and Brock's. As it turned out, the two well-heeled Whimsy wives shared an opinion on many weighty topics, ranging from

blue eyeshadow (trashy) to illegal immigrants (a drain on the economy) and reality television (repulsive in theory, but addictive in private practice) to a woman's place in politics and family (at the top, just high enough above her man's head that everyone but he could see her running the show with one hand and petting his fragile ego with the other). In addition, they both had vision and drive, and their plans for the town meshed well together. Heather just had the nicer nails, and Emma the stronger work ethic, was all.

“Back to the point, though,” Heather said, her voice unexpectedly serious.

“Right. But what was the point, again?”

“Beth! She's still in the WLBS, and I'm sure I don't have to remind you how nervous she makes us.”

“No, I'm well aware of that.” When Heather didn't respond, Emma pursed her lips and stared blankly at the far wall of her bedroom, waiting for a solution to click into place. Finally, she licked her lips, tilted her head in her own show of faux-innocence (though she knew no one could see her), and said, “Well, maybe we'd all be a titch more comfortable if dear little Beth simply had some guidance in the form of, say, a few well-chosen friends within the WLBS. We really haven't made an effort to embrace her yet.”

“I believe I see the play you're suggesting here. Friends, enemies; close, closer.”

“It's an oldie, but a goodie,” Emma bragged.

Heather's chuckle came across the line smooth and clear. “I like it a lot!” she said.

“And you know, I was just thinking that we haven't really made an effort to embrace Beth yet. Perhaps it *is* time to extend a proper Whimsy welcome her way.”

“Fantastic. Tell me how this sounds, then: Tomorrow, since I have to make a long, tedious drive anyway, I’ll go ahead and call Beth from the road to invite her to lunch at your house on Thursday.”

“Thursday? Um... I guess that would work. Yeah, yeah. I’ll just have to move a meeting. Thursday is great.” Heather suddenly sounded muffled, like her lips were farther from the phone. Emma was almost certain it was because her friend had leaned away to smooth her hair down on either side of its part. Heather had more tells than she realized, and Emma knew each one.

“Great,” Emma said. Without warning, her hands and head had grown heavy with fatigue, which crashed against her entire being like a wave, threatening to knock her down and pull her under. It took everything she had left to stifle a yawn. “I’ll see you then.”

“See you then,” Heather echoed.

The line went dead. Emma let the phone slip from her hand as her eyelids fluttered closed once again. She rolled over onto her right side, but didn’t bother to crawl under the comforter or stretch the striped afghan folded over the footboard across her body. Within minutes, she was asleep and snoring lightly.

Chapter Three

Heather

On Wednesday evening, five days after the WLBS meeting and her subsequent call to Emma, Heather lingered under the glow of the overhead light in her parked Lexus hybrid, midway down a row of vehicles on the left side of Natural Nourishment's smooth asphalt lot. Before she loosened her seatbelt, disengaged the lock, and started walking toward the automatic doors of Whimsy's finer grocery store, she made a point of checking her mascara in her car visor's vanity mirror, even though she knew it would be flawless. After all, Mrs. Christopher Hartman, rising marketing coordinator and wife of the vice-president (and future C.E.O.) of Hartman and Sons Consulting, always bought the expensive kinds of makeup when she visited the Macy's or Nordstrom in the city, the kinds that only smudged if she rubbed her face or cried profusely. She hadn't cried all day, because, as a rule, she saved her tears for special occasions, circumstances in which a few well-shed drops could win whatever prize she'd been eyeing. Whether she liked it or not, her recent doctor's appointment was not one of them.

Tears or no tears, though, all Heather wanted now was to get in and out of the grocery store as quickly as possible. She yearned to be alone in her quiet house with the shades drawn and the driveway empty – ached to unfurl her lean, hard body against the cool black and white tiles of the kitchen floor and just sprawl there, absently tracing the grid of rough grout lines with the tip of her index finger. Since Christopher

was working late again, the whole place would be hers for most of the night. It would be so much easier to pretend she wasn't grieving when her only audience member was herself.

With that in mind, Heather snatched her faux-crocodile handbag from the passenger seat, and marched toward the store, breezing past the nine year old girls hawking cookies without a glance. Several steps beyond their table, the stock boy straightening shopping carts at the entrance widened his eyes when Heather snatched the nearest one from him, and she could feel his gaze follow her as she sauntered away. Although she stared ahead, Heather toyed with the idea of swiveling around to give him just one wink. She didn't even make it out of the produce section before she realized she was in trouble, though. In front of the tofu, meatless "chicken nuggets," and other vegetarian-friendly horrors stood a very tan, very *pregnant* Shelley Sanders – or Shelley Hamilton now, Heather supposed. Apparently, either the universe at large, with its infinite wisdom and sick sense of humor, or Whimsy, in particular, had chosen this day over all the rest to pull a skeleton out of Heather's closet and send it her way, complete with a curly haired toddler, a cart full of juice and whole grain cereal, and a fetus.

In many ways, Shelley Sanders had been the original Heather Hartman, even before Heather had truly been Heather. Shelley had been at the top of the popularity food chain at Whimsy Middle School when Heather's family moved to town, and she'd stayed there until they graduated from Whimsy High School six years later. She'd also been Heather's first Whimsy friend. For whatever reason, thirteen year old Shelley had taken an interest in the lanky new girl who always stood with her legs and arms crossed. In short order, she adopted her as sort of a protégé – or a pet. To Heather, that had been

good enough. A friend was a friend, and this friend came with unmatched benefits. Shelley taught Heather everything she knew about French manicures, highlights, push-up bras, and flirting, and by the time they'd started high school, Heather had been her costar. Crowds of pimply preteens seemed to part when they walked the halls, the two of them always sat at the center of the most crowded table in the cafeteria, and Heather always had a new guy (or two or three) lined up. It'd been like a movie or a dream. It'd been life as it was meant to be lived.

Now, a dozen years later, Heather stood frozen behind a bin of lumpy sweet potatoes, deciding whether or not she should hide from her old friend. With every fiber in her body, she wanted to dive into the canned vegetable aisle and make her getaway, but she couldn't stop examining Shelley. So much about her looked as it had when they'd graduated, before Shelley had married Chet Hamilton and started her new, domestic life at the ripe old age of nineteen. But there were differences too – the ones Heather had sensed the first time she'd visited Shelley and Chet's tiny home the summer before college. The ones that had driven her away, had made her want to stop taking Shelley's calls, and had caused her relief when Shelley had stopped calling altogether. Her former friend was softer, somehow, even though she still dressed well and looked great, even with her hair tied back, a diaper bag over her arm, and one hand on her bulging stomach. She seemed happy, maternal, and domestic, and Heather couldn't stand it. Especially now, right after the appointment.

The next twenty minutes were a mad dash game of hide-and-seek, except that the seeker didn't know she was playing. Heather made her retreat into the canned vegetable aisle, although she almost knocked down a display of soon-to-expire off brand potato

chips on the way. Presenting herself, she was good at. Setting the stage so she could stroll on as the best and only character, she had perfected. But her hiding skills were a little rusty, so there were a few close calls as she dashed between aisles grabbing ingredients for the chicken parmesan Emma planned to make for their lunch with Beth the next day. She had trouble holding on to everything, in large part because she'd been so distracted she abandoned her cart somewhere. She couldn't even remember which section she'd left it in. It'd been a long while since she had last experienced panic, but she was finding that she still didn't like the taste.

By the time she made it to the back of the store for milk, Heather was half-hugging, half-cradling an armful of cold chicken breasts, canisters of bread crumbs and cheese, the five different spices on Emma's list (which she now held between her teeth), and three packs of broken linguine against her chest. The noodles had balanced on top of everything else for all of five minutes, before sliding off when Heather tried to lean out of an aisle to check for Shelley. She'd just stared at the bags of pasta on the floor, tempted to abandon them and fight on, until a gangly teenage boy in a black t-shirt and sagging jeans asked, "Uh, ma'am, do you need some help?" All she'd been able to do was nod and hold out her heavy arms to receive each package the boy scooped from the ground. She didn't even grimace at the inch and a half of crack he flashed every time he bent down.

Now that her ingredient mound had been restored, she went straight to the dairy refrigerators, shrugging her right shoulder to inch one of her purse straps down her arm. When the bag gapped open, she dumped some of the smaller items, the cheeses and spices, into its mouth to make room for the milk, hoisted a half gallon onto the pile,

secured it with her chin, and raced back toward the front of the store. She was so close, almost out.

That was when it happened, of course. It had to be, because Heather lived in Whimsy, where wacky coincidences came to breed, every other store had a bad pun for a name, and no one could stay hidden for long. Near misses were unheard of in that town. So when Heather turned a corner into the produce section, she ran straight into Shelley Used-To-Be-Sanders Hamilton. Chicken parmesan fixings flew in every direction, and the woman who'd been trying to balance them fell back on her butt.

“Heather?” Shelley asked, her strawberry pink, chapsticked lips sagging open and then stretching into a broad smile. “Heather Marshall? Or rather, Hartman, now, right? That’s what I heard. But, ohmygosh, I haven’t seen you in, I don’t know, just in forever!”

As she scrambled to scoop up her groceries, Heather swallowed nothing but air several times and choked back the urge to inform Shelley that their lapse in communication had been intentional, at least on her part. But she figured the other woman had to suspect, even if she wasn’t sure. In a town the size and temperament of Whimsy, people just didn’t *not* see each other unless one of them was going out of her way to avoid the other. In fact, it was a small miracle that they’d made it as long as they had. The two of them had been playing the part of strangers for – what, thirteen years, give or take? Twelve since Heather had moved to the city and five since she’d moved back with Christopher. It’d been a pretty good run, despite an abrupt, unwelcome conclusion.

As she let the curtain fall on the decade-long charade, grabbed her parmesan cheese from the floor, and stood up, Heather tried to smile back at Shelley. Instead,

however, she ended up locking eyes with the chubby-cheeked toddler wriggling around in the front of Shelley's cart. The hood of the child's green and yellow striped jumpsuit covered most of its short, curly blond hair, and Heather couldn't tell if it was a boy or girl. Whatever it was, though, it could scowl. Shelley's offspring fixed Heather with a blue-eyed death glare that made her feel like she was going to tumble back all over again. For a second, she had to focus all of her efforts on blinking and trying to maintain her balance.

"Oh! Oh! I'm sorry, how rude of me," Shelley said, clutching her pregnant belly and crouching to pick up a bag of garlic cloves Heather had missed. Over its mother's head, the toddler continued to stare at Heather with something resembling contempt, but Heather just glared back now. She had suddenly grown weary of this role and ready to jump to the death scene, so she could take her bows. She wasn't about to be intimidated by a two year old, especially one armed only with a bad attitude and a gender crisis. She was Heather Hartman, dammit!

"Thanks." Heather took the garlic from Shelley's extended hand, and they both stood up, tittering uncertainly at themselves, each other, and the situation. The latter's lilac nail polish was chipped and gritty, a home manicure quite unlike the smooth solon French tips Heather maintained. It was charming, in its own way, but Heather forced herself to hate it. She needed to regain her cool. She needed to reclaim her Heatherness.

She needed that kid to stop staring at her.

"Shelley, honey!" Heather said, drawing her chin and cheeks up just enough to manufacture sincerity as she slid to the right so the other woman's pronounced belly would hide her view of the blond devil child. "It's so great to see you!"

Back in high school, Shelley had been able to see through every single one of Heather's lies – probably because she was the one who taught Heather everything she knew about deceit then. For this reason, she had been the first to know when Heather lost her virginity to Darren Gilder in the back of his mother's Volkswagen Jetta and the only one of Heather's peers to ever find out that Heather's father had been forced to take Mr. Perkins golfing at their country club to keep his daughter from failing freshman biology.

But at present, Heather's display seemed to satisfy the once infallible human lie detector. Shelley just smiled back and stuck to small talk: husbands, jobs, hair salons, which of their former classmates had and had not been able to escape Whimsy, as they'd all promised themselves they would as they accepted their diplomas. That sort of thing. Shelley related tales of chance encounters and delayed flights during family vacations to such exotic locales as Omaha and St. Louis, Heather bragged about her job (and even mentioned the WLBS and the treasure hunt), and the whole ordeal was over within fifteen minutes. After all Heather's worrying and running around and linguine breaking, the Great Grocery Store Run-In of 2013 amounted to little more than an impersonal chat.

If anything, in fact, it had gotten Heather's mind off of what had turned out to be the latest and most devastating in a string of discouraging doctor's visits, and it wasn't until she was watching Shelley roll her cart and toddler toward the check-out aisles that she allowed her pretense of joy to wash away.

Sterile. That's what her doctor had said. That's what he had called her after she had prodded him for a straight answer, no bullshit, no platitudes, no medical mumbo jumbo to mask his pity. The word alone caused Heather to think of cold metal and

injections and women with ice for eyes. Women who had never loved and would never love. It was enough to make anyone shudder.

“And don’t you forget to call me real soon!” Shelley called back to Heather, as she gave a final wave. “I can’t wait to hear every last detail about this fantastic life of yours!”

“Yeah, I’ll get right on that,” Heather replied, too quietly to be heard. From her position in the produce section, she watched Shelley hand her groceries to an aging cashier, pay, collect her bags, and toddle off toward the exit without even glancing back at her former friend one last time. As the automatic doors slid shut behind Shelley Used-To-Be-Sanders Hamilton and her androgynous demon spawn, Heather tried to busy herself with shopping, blindly reaching into the nearest produce bin and grabbing something slick and slightly wet: a vine of red grapes, wrapped in clear, hole-punched plastic.

She let the grapes rest in her open hand, measuring the weight and tenderness of the plastic-bound bundle, determining its shape and elasticity with her palm, before checking the produce sign above the bin and chucking the entire bag back in.

Seedless. It figured.

The half of a Caesar salad Heather had eaten for lunch suddenly threatened to rise back into her throat, and without another thought, she lurched towards the checkout aisles and dumped her entire armful of groceries on the nearest empty conveyor belt. As luck would have it, half of her items had been rung up before she actually looked at the cashier in front of her and realized it was the same elderly lady who had assisted Shelley, the one who had laughed when the toddler snatched at the locket around her neck and then pulled

the heart open to let Shelley and her child look inside. Her gray curls drooped over her eyes now as she scanned items with her head down, but it was the same woman, alright. Her locket even hung open still.

“Give me a break,” Heather moaned, louder than she’d intended. She hadn’t meant to say it at all, but apparently certain thoughts couldn’t be filtered.

“Excuse me?” the cashier asked as she slipped a chicken breast held to a thin Styrofoam tray with cling wrap into a paper sack. According to the nametag on her soiled green smock, her name was Darla. “I didn’t quite catch that.”

“Nothing. It wasn’t important.” After that, Heather said little else as Darla bagged the rest of her groceries, prompted her to swipe her credit card, and wished her well and bid her to return to Natural Nourishment soon. As soon as she had the foot-and-a-half long receipt in her hand, she shuffled back towards the entrance, all the while shifting her sacks back and forth, trying to reach into the purse on her shoulder and pull out her car keys without dropping anything. She was only one or two shifts away when she crossed through the first set of sliding doors, and an alarm went off.

The thing sounded like an old beeper, with a touch of ambulance thrown in, so it was grating enough to make Heather pause and look around, expecting to see another shopper digging through his bags, embarrassed and slightly frantic. Instead, she found that all eyes were on her, most glassy with lazy vexation or soft with pity, some bright with curiosity, and a few narrowed with genuine suspicion. For those last ones, Heather gave an exaggerated scoff and disbelieving head shake and set down her bags. In the meantime, the grocery boy who’d admired her backside earlier slipped out from behind a train of carts and approached her.

“It must be a false alarm,” she assured the chubby, bespectacled cart pusher when he reached her. He seemed to be about sixteen, with little to no experience talking to attractive older women, and he looked more abashed than any shopper would ever be. “I have my receipt right here, if you want to take a look.” As she handed him the strip of paper, she made sure her palm brushed against his.

“Uh, thank you, ma’am,” he stuttered. “We have false alarms all the time, so I’m sure that’s it. If I can just glance into those bags and, um, your purse there, you can be on your way real quick.”

“Of course,” Heather cooed. The boy stepped forward and began poking through the paper bags, while she slipped her purse from her shoulder. Just as he turned back to her, the purse slipped open again, and she instantly realized her mistake: Sitting right on top of her car keys, her favorite red lip stain, and her e-reader were two blocks of cheese and shakers of the three most expensive spices Emma had asked for.

“Oh,” she said. That was all there was to say.

“Yeah... I’m going to have to call my manager,” the boy replied.

Forty-five minutes later, Heather was sitting on a bench in the cinderblock front room of the Whimsy Police Department with a fluorescent light flickering over her head, waiting for one of the officers to return her purse and grocery bags to her. The whole place was dingy, faintly urine-scented, and unpleasant. Even the plastic fern standing in one of the brighter corners of the room looked as if it were wilting, and Heather couldn’t blame it. It had taken her a ride in the back of a patrol car and twenty minutes of trying to explain her honest oversight to Detectives Dumb and Dumber to sort out the

misunderstanding, and now she was just ready to collect her things and go. She never would have guessed that Natural Nourishment was so over-the-top about security, or that the men at the WPD had so little to do on a Wednesday night.

After another five minutes of watching a fresh-faced desk lackey read the sports section of Sunday's paper, Heather finally received her reward, in the form of a young officer with a crew cut holding her purse in front of him with both hands as he came in from one of the back rooms.

"If you'll just sign this form—" he told her stiffly, using his chin to point at the clipboard tucked under his arm.

"Uh huh." Heather snatched the clipboard, scribbled something that could have been her name (if it had actually contained any letters besides two *Hs*) on the dotted line, and thrust the whole thing back at the officer. "We can trade now, right?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," he said. She grabbed her purse from him, he took the clipboard from her, and then she rushed for the front door. Seconds later, she was free, free, free, standing alone on the steps of police building in the cool, sapphire blue night with her handbag, her groceries, and... no car. Her Lexus was still in Natural Nourishment's parking lot, and she was stranded on the emptiest part of Main Street.

"Okay, this is not a crisis, Heather. This is just one last hurdle to clear before you can go home. So how can you fix this? What can you do?" she breathed as she began patting her pockets. When she got to the right bottom corner of her coat, she hit a flat, rectangular bulge. "Oh, you can call someone, that's what."

With a quick look around to make sure she truly was as alone as she believed, Heather slipped her phone out of her jacket, opened her call history, and tapped on an

unsaved number that appeared several times. Holding the phone to her ear, she closed her eyes to pray for an answer and count the rings. She got to three, and then she got her answer.

“Oh, baby, thank God you picked up,” she said. “I know I shouldn’t be calling you this late, but, sweetie, I’m really in a bit of a pickle. I’m kind of stranded downtown, and Chris won’t be off work for hours. Do you think you could maybe pick me up and take me to my car? I could make it worth your time, you know.”

Chapter Four

Beth

“Well, hello, hello! Looks like you’re turning out to be quite the early bird, aren’t you?” Emma exclaimed from the doorway when Beth arrived for lunch on Thursday. Of course, since Beth had reached the waist-high picket fence enclosing Heather’s two-story, prairie-style home at 12:18 PM, she was, in fact, three minutes late. She’d accidentally taken a right on Honored Lady Drive on her way over, her feet steering her towards her own house while her head puzzled over the phone call and invitation she’d received Saturday morning.

“Just like Catherine,” Emma went on, balling up the pinstriped kitchen towel in her hands as she stepped out onto the elevated stone porch and beckoned to the blushing latecomer. “But it’s no matter. Get yourself on up here, honey.”

Gripping a heavy, bright yellow plastic serving bowl of fruit salad, Beth wobbled up the tall, narrow steps in new, light pink T-strap heels and a black daisy-print sundress that exposed too much of her soft upper arms and shoulders for her comfort. Besides stiffening her skin with a numb chill, the whole outfit left her feeling self-conscious and false, as if she were a young girl playing dress-up in mommy’s closet who’d been caught with three strings of pearls around her neck and waxy lipstick smeared across her face. Once she reached the top of the stairs, though, her worry about losing her balance subsided at least, and she could open her mouth to apologize for her tardiness. But before

she spoke, Emma sailed forward with open arms to hug her around the fruit salad, and Beth realized Emma hadn't intended for her remark about Beth's earliness to be sarcastic. The other woman genuinely thought three minutes late was early.

Apparently, Beth still hadn't quite mastered Whimsy time. With all its intricacies and variability, it still managed to confound her, even though she'd lived in the town long enough to know that when it worked, it *really* worked. Entire parties of people – men, women, children, cats, dogs, parakeets – could converge upon a location at the same moment, all equally, fashionably, Whimsically late. As far as Beth could tell, there had to be some sort of code: on Tuesdays 5:00 meant 5:15, on Thursdays 5:45, and so on. It was either that or magic. Heck, the entire system could have been tied to the lunar cycle and the town's bus schedule by the resident Whimsy wizard, for all the sense it made to her.

"I'm sorry. I didn't—do you need more time? I could wait here," Beth said, her eyes trained on the bowl in her hands instead of Emma, who had firmly planted herself between the two spiral-cut potted shrubs that framed the front door. She was about to hold out the dish like an offering, an apology for not being late enough, when Heather appeared behind Emma. Unlike her middle-aged friend, who had bread crumbs in her hair and a large wet spot on her gold-buttoned tweed cardigan, Heather looked like one of those home magazine models who held plastic key lime pies and pretended they could operate an oven. She was even wearing one of her standard issue, perfect grins with dark jeans, a curve-hugging turtleneck, and a ruffled cherry-print apron that fastened around her waist and still bore crease lines from being folded in a plastic bag.

"Beth! You're here!" Heather squealed as she pushed Emma aside and wrapped her long, slender arms around her guest. "Emma and I were just talking about you, you

know. In fact, right before the doorbell rang, I was telling her how nice it is to have you at our WLBS meetings – and, of course, Emma was agreeing with me one-hundred and twenty-two percent. Isn't that the darndest thing, though? It's so funny how timing works out sometimes. But, Beth, I just have to say, we're both beyond thrilled you joined our little book club, we really are. Isn't that true, Emma? Aren't we thrilled?"

"So, so thrilled," replied Emma, beaming broadly.

With the greetings and hugging out of the way, Heather clutched her guest's right shoulder and steered her through the doorway and living room and toward the kitchen. Emma followed closely enough to clip Beth's heels once or twice, but spoke sparingly. Heather did most of the talking, leaping from topic to topic with little warning and giving Beth the impression of an over-caffeinated rhesus monkey. By the time she led them into her brightly-lit kitchen, in fact, she'd covered everything from the weather ("It's nice enough for November, but still a bit nippy for my taste") to Whimsy politics ("As much as I want Smith to win, I swear to God she'll have to step over my dead body if she wants to put one of those tacky campaign posters in my yard") to Mrs. Garrison's lipstick ("Orange? Really? *Orange?*").

Beth's head had started spinning approximately three feet past the front door.

The kitchen itself did nothing for Beth's balance, unfortunately. With chrome-plated appliances, black granite countertops, and stark white walls, the room was distinctly modern and unlike any room she'd seen before. The checkerboard floor and smooth cubic cabinets, in truth, made her dizzier than ever, and she faltered in the doorway as Heather rushed ahead, forcing Emma to knock into her back, belly first. When she turned to apologize, though, the other woman merely smirked and leaned in

even farther so that their noses were almost touching. At this close a proximity, Beth could smell something rancid, like rotten eggs mixed with sourdough and a splash of cooking sherry, on her companion's breath.

"Garish, isn't it?" Emma whispered, gesturing toward the black, white, and chrome room before them. Beth only had time to nod, breath held, before she spun around to gasp as quietly as possible.

"Such a shame. I guess there really is no telling when it comes to taste. I just feel bad for poor Christopher," Emma continued to the back of Beth's head. When she got no response, she raised her voice and asked, "Heather, dear, are we almost ready for lunch?"

"I think so," Heather said. She was squatting in front of the oven, looking in at some charred lumps that might have once been chicken. "Yes, definitely. I'd say your chicken parmescortched – I mean chicken *parmesan* – is more than ready to come out."

"Parmescortched? What do you mean? Is it burnt?" Emma rushed toward the oven, and Heather stepped aside, looked over at Beth, and rolled her eyes dramatically.

"That's what parmescortched implies, isn't it?"

As she pulled the pan of chicken out of the oven, Emma turned to Heather with an expression that, in all likelihood, would have made Beth dissolve into a puddle of apologetic liquid fear. Heather, however, simply returned the look and then grabbed Beth's hand to steer her towards the table while Emma carried over the dishes. Having positioned Beth at the head of the table, she took a seat on her left and began thrusting warm dishes at her as quickly as they were set down until Emma finally sank into the seat on her right. The two of them filled their plates with chicken, oversteamed green pea

mush, fruit salad, and some sort of sticky brown substance full of cornbread crumbs before lowering their heads in silent prayer.

“Well,” Emma said after a moment. She skewered a strawberry from the fruit salad with a fork, popped it into her mouth, and bit down once. “Let’s eat.”

“So, ladies, what’s new?” Heather asked warmly, cocking her head in Beth and Emma’s direction. She paused to take a bite of something, but unlike Emma, chewed to completion with her mouth shut. “I feel like I haven’t truly gotten to catch up with either of you recently. I mean Emma and I see each other so frequently we sometimes forget we haven’t had a heart-to-heart in a while. And Beth, even though we haven’t known each other for that long, I’ve always thought we had a special connection. I really do feel like the three of us were meant to be friends.”

“Mmmhmm,” Emma added, raising her hand to cover part of her mouth with her stubby fingers as she swallowed some brown gunk. “I completely agree. Beth, I know – I just know in my *heart* – that the good Lord put all three of us the WLBS so that we could find each other. He, in his infinite grace and wisdom, looked down on little old Whimsy, USA, and when He did, He said, ‘These women have important roles to play in each other’s lives, and if it takes a ladies book society to bring them together, so be it. It will be well worth the love they’ll share when they find one another.’ And He was right, wasn’t He, Heather?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Heather said, eyes shining in her guests’ direction. “And now here we are, breaking bread over my kitchen table.”

At that, Beth blushed and looked down at her untouched plate, trying to conceal herself from the sudden attention and unexpected kindness. Her earlier judgments of

Heather and Emma, she realized, had been less than charitable: these two women weren't catty, but playful and warm. Beth had been mistaking their jokes and their quick acceptance of her as petty insults and indifference ever since she joined the WLBS, but in reality, they'd considered her a friend all along. It was she who had wronged them, not the other way around.

"I never knew you felt that way," she mumbled to her food. There was no way she'd be able to look either Emma or Heather in the eye with so much guilt weighing upon her. She couldn't even lift her fork.

"Of course we did," Heather chirped. "But you two never answered my question: what new, earth-shattering things are going on in the lives of Whimsy's own Beth Mueller and Emma Walters?"

Beth figured she'd let Emma go first while she tried to locate her missing appetite, and the other woman, fortunately, was more than willing. It only took her about half a second to note Beth's hesitation and jump in, in fact.

"Well, I didn't want to say anything and get everyone all riled up, but I've been having to fight with the other members of the Whimsy School Board again. It's been kind of a big knock-down-drag-out affair over the curriculum, actually, because they want to teach evolution in every single science class. As in, *only* evolution. But I'm not going to stand for that, don't you worry. I have more control over what happens in those schools than the rest of the members combined, and that's a fact. "

After a moment of silence, Heather coughed into her hand and said, "That sounds quite trying for you." She tried to launch into her own story, something about a coworker with a bad haircut, but didn't get far before she was interrupted by Emma.

“Mmrphh hrmm,” the older woman grunted, hastily forcing a spoonful of mashed chicken, cantaloupe, and peas into her mouth. “I’m not done. I was about to say that the schools have been teaching evolution for years, as you know. There’s nothing I can do about that. But now the board wants to tell Mr. Blecker and the rest to stop covering creationism! They don’t want them to even mention the controversy over the whole thing. Can you believe that? They want to hide all evidence, all the proof, against it and completely ignore every other theory. And that simply shouldn’t be allowed. I mean, if you ask me, evolution’s all a bunch of hogwash dreamt up by atheist *academics* and readily swallowed by the amoral masses. I, for one, am certain that the good, Christian people of Whimsy would not want that poison passed off as the gospel truth by their children’s teachers and mentors—”

At last, Beth found herself unable to hold her tongue any longer. “I’m sorry, Emma. I’m not sure I heard you correctly. Are you saying you *don’t* believe in evolution?”

Emma’s fingers tightened around the handle of her fork as she turned her head to stare at Beth. Neither woman blinked for several seconds.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying, dear. I don’t know why you’re so surprised. Surely you’re aware that evolution goes against everything in Genesis, and – and! – it’s only a theory. I myself have some theories about the human condition and the current condition of this once great nation, but you don’t see me pushing them on impressionable children, do you?”

“But that’s not the same thi–” Beth’s protest was cut short by a sharp pain in her left calf, which surprised her almost as much as the sound of her own voice had. She

glanced under the table, found the pointed tip of one of Heather's turquoise pumps digging into her leg, and shut her mouth.

“Perhaps this isn't the best time to discuss such matters,” the redhead proposed. She slowly retracted the toe of her shoe from Beth's flesh and picked up her fork and knife, clearing the air with a quick, throaty chuckle. “I'm sure we're just misunderstanding each other because we're all a little testy and hungry. We've barely begun eating, for heaven's sake! So I say, until we've got some more food in our stomachs, let's talk about something else. Can we do that? Emma, I know you've been dying to talk to Beth about Jake's party.”

“Jake's party?” Beth echoed. Although she hadn't finished processing everything that had transpired in the last couple minutes, she decided to shelve it all – the evolution argument, Heather's calf attack – and come back to it later. She'd tell David about it tonight over dinner. Even if he couldn't make sense of it either, they'd throw out some wild theories and share a good laugh, at the very least. With any luck, she'd get to see that crooked smile that had made her fall in love with him in the first place.

“Oh! Yes! Yes, yes, yes!” Emma dropped her fork as she twisted around to face Beth, and it hit her plate clank that made the other two women wince. “I don't know why I've been going on about all this other stuff when I haven't even told you about the party. I could just kill Heather for letting me forget. But anyway, the party. Now, I was originally going to wait until the WLBS meeting tomorrow night to talk to you about it. I just can't resist, though, and I'd rather avoid mentioning it in mixed company.”

For the next twenty-five minutes, Emma rattled on about her youngest child's eighth birthday party, about the decorations and the guests and the food, and Beth tried to

listen. Once or twice, she found herself focusing instead on the red smear of marinara sauce on the other woman's left cheek, but she never seemed to miss much. Fortunately (or unfortunately, rather), Emma made it easy to catch up by using a hundred words to express what Beth could have said in two.

“We're registered at Tim's Toys on Main. It's truly the best toy store in town, and I'm not just saying that because Tim is Virginia's nephew and only remaining family. I don't let those kinds of things influence my decisions.” Emma finally concluded, right around the time Beth resigned herself to attending. There was no way she could beg out of attending after letting Emma give the longest address in Whimsy history.

Both Emma and Heather were staring at Beth expectantly now, but after so long a silence, all she could think to say was, “You have a gift registry at a toy store? For your son's birthday?”

The other two women blinked at Beth once, in eerie unison, and smiled.

“Why wouldn't I?” Emma asked. “If you can register for weddings and baby showers, why not for birthdays? When you go down to the toy store, Tim or one of his lackeys will give you a list of approved items, so all you have to do is pick one out, have it wrapped, and bring it to the party a week from Saturday. This way, people will know exactly what I want for Jake, and there won't be any surprises. Trust me, you can't possibly go wrong.”

With a confused nod, Beth finally began eating her now room-temperature lunch, which she'd been too afraid to touch during Emma's speech. Heather and Emma continued chatting as they picked over their food, but Beth ate in silence, counting down

forkfuls of green mush and blackened chicken and plotting her escape from her new friends.

Beth pulled her jacket tight around her body as she walked down Main Street towards Tim's Toy Store that evening, her skin tingling from the chilly November air and the breeze that rustled the yellow-leafed Hickory trees that stood in front of each small brick building along Whimsy's busiest road. As she passed the pharmacy/gift shop on the corner of Main and Live Oak, she almost turned and went in to seek shelter and a mug of hot chocolate at the old-fashioned soda fountain nestled between the racks of postcards and the ancient building's farthest wall. Whimsy was much farther north than the town she'd lived in previously, and it still felt colder and stranger, and every step Beth took down the still unfamiliar streets, every degree the temperature dropped, reminded her that she was not home, that she didn't belong in Whimsy, with its esoteric inner-workings and its Whimsy time and its women's book clubs that held treasure hunts. It reminded her that she could not return to Winter Haven.

Looking up two minutes later, Beth realized that she had walked three stores beyond Tim's Toys with her mind on the past and her face bent downward against the cold. She spun and nearly tripped over a young girl with black corkscrew curls who had been walking behind her, hand in hand with a weathered woman who must have been her grandmother. Beth stuttered out an apology, patted the girl on the shoulder, and rushed back towards Tim's Toys, where she stumbled into the warm main room. Before her eyes could focus on anything in particular, her nose filled with the scents of crisp cardboard boxes inked with glossy scenes of children playing, wooden toys considered classics by

parents tired of buying the latest plastic distractions, and something she couldn't quite place that reminded her, oddly, of Agèd Pages.

"Well, hello there," someone said from the other side of the room. The speaker, Beth realized after a couple seconds of blindly glancing around the store, was a young blond man in a dark green apron. He was leaning around a table display of stuffed dinosaurs and dino-related children's books to greet her.

"Welcome to Tim's Toys on Main," he continued as he walked out from behind the table and toward Beth. "I'm Tim."

The man's name, Tim's name, finally restarted whatever part of Beth's brain had crashed when he surprised her, and she was at last able to exclaim, "Oh. Oh! You're *the* Tim, Mrs. Garrison's nephew."

"That I am," Tim laughed. When he reached Beth, he wiped his hand on his apron and then offered it to Beth. "How do you know my aunt?"

Beth shook his hand, but dropped it quickly, her toes curling inside her shoes and her palms tingling from this stranger's touch. "Um, I'm in a book club with her. The WLBS. My name is Beth. Mueller."

Tim cocked his head to one side, and his smile broadened, revealing a full set of white, slightly crooked teeth. "Really? Another WLBS lady. Well, that's wonderful. It's always a pleasure to meet one of Aunt Ginny's friends, especially smart, literary ones she may have mentioned once or twice. But anyway, how can I help you today, Beth?"

"I guess I'm supposed to ask you about a gift registry for a party next week?" she asked uncertainly, staring at the instructions she'd scribbled on the post-it note in her hand.

“Ah, you’re here about Jake Walters, Emma’s son.”

Beth looked up, startled, and met Tim’s hazel eyes unintentionally. “Yeah, how’d you know?”

“Believe it or not, we don’t get a lot of gift registries here. It’s pretty much just the one, in fact. Mrs. Walters came in here about a month ago, insisted that we make a gift registry for her, made one of my assistants cry, and then went around picking out all the toys herself. Her son wasn’t even with her. She’s, uh, she’s a character, alright.” Tim laughed again, and this time Beth laughed as well, slightly more at ease with this warmly self-possessed relative of Mrs. Garrison than before – and certainly more than she, the prickingly uncomfortable girl who seemed to float so high up above everyone else in the cool, thin atmosphere, too far away to ever be really heard or seen by her grounded peers, would have expected. It struck her, in fact, that he was the most familiar-seeming stranger she’d ever met, although she didn’t know what to make of that.

“So if you’re ready,” Tim said, gesturing for Beth to follow him, “let’s get started.”

And so they did.

Another hour later, Beth was standing on her own front porch, turning her key in the lock on her door with a paper bag containing a painted wooden puzzle and a set of forest animal finger puppets in her left hand and Tim’s business card in her pocket. He’d been helpful and charming the entire time she’d been in his store and had even helped her pick out the most interesting items from Emma’s exhaustive list of boring toys. Beth knew that she probably wouldn’t see him again anytime soon, would have little future

need for his services and card, but she was glad she'd met him nevertheless. It seemed she'd found someone genuine and normal in Whimsy at last, and it made sense to her that he was related to Mrs. Garrison, who, although a bit odd, was at least kind and enthusiastic and sincere. Beth still wasn't convinced she could say as much about Heather or Emma or even her boss, Dr. Anderson. For months now, her only reprieve from the discomfort she felt in their world, in the universe of Whimsy, had been her quiet nights at home with David.

"Maybe that's it," she told herself as she pushed open the door and stepped over the threshold. "Maybe Tim reminded me of David, and that's why I could be so comfortable with him after only a couple minutes."

The physical resemblance between dark-haired, light-skinned, tall David and Tim, who was tan and blond and average in height, wasn't particularly great, however, just as not every night with David was truthfully quiet and peaceful. Twice in the last two weeks alone, they'd wound up arguing to the point of shouting matches about wedding plans or his inattention and her insecurity. But for the majority of their evenings, luckily, they at least got along. On those nights, the ones that weren't truly good or bad, they would make small talk over dinner, watch their usual shows, and then go to bed. She would say, "I love you," before she turned out the light. He would say, "You too," and then go to sleep. And that was enough for her.

As soon as Beth reached the kitchen, key and paper bag still in hand, though, she knew tonight wasn't going to be one of those nights.

Beth found David slouching at the kitchen table across from her, frowning as he swallowed a sip of beer from a dark glass bottle. She let her gaze dart toward the trash

can in the corner of the room, where she counted at least three more empty bottles near the top of the bin. Like her, David was more of a social drinker than anything else, so when he did drink alone in a dark room, she knew something was wrong.

“Where have you been?” he demanded, pulling himself in his chair to look straight at her, perhaps to search for the cause of his own dark mood in her appearance or simply to find a defect to fight about.

“I went to the toy store on Main after work to pick up a present for a party Emma invited me to,” Beth said, trying to avert the crisis she knew was coming. “But you seem upset. What’s wrong, baby?”

“What’s wrong?” David shot back as he pushed himself upright and out of his chair altogether. “What’s wrong? Oh, I don’t know. I’ve had a shitty two days at work because nobody ever tells me anything unless they need me to rush back in to fix their latest screw-up, and I come home, hoping for a little downtime with my fiancée, only to find that she’s not here and couldn’t be bothered to let me know where she’d be. Do you know how frustrating it is to be in the dark? And then, of course, it turns out that you were out on the town, shopping, spending money we don’t have so you can impress those manipulative, melodramatic women in your stupid little book club. But you don’t want to get me started on that book club that you told me, swore, you were going to quit last Friday. How’d that go? Oh, yeah, it didn’t.”

While David spoke, Beth could feel the world falling away from her. The floor flew out from under her feet, the wall behind David wheeled away into the nothingness, the oven evaporated as it shot toward a dimming sun, and then she was alone, hovering in an empty universe. The only things she could see were David’s eyes boring into her. The

only things she could hear the words, the jumbled up consonants and vowels, he was shouting at her.

“I understand being frustrated about work, but I don’t think it’s fair of you to take it out on me,” Beth whispered, her head hung to hide her reddening cheeks and the tears that were already threatening to swell and spill from her eyes. Only David could affect her so sharply so quickly. “And besides, I didn’t know I had to go to the toy store until today. Otherwise I would have told you.”

“Yeah, whatever. Like anybody tells me anything. My boss, my coworkers. Even you and your little book club friends, with your meetings and your pointless treasure hunt and your lame excuses.” David strode across the kitchen, pulling his car keys out of his pocket as he brushed past Beth without a glance and left her bewildered.

“David!” she called to him as he walked away, feeling a spark of anger shoot through her and consciously, irrationally, deciding to fan it into life. “You can’t just yell at me and then leave, damn it! Where are you going?”

“I’m going for a drive.” With that, he slammed the front door behind him, and was gone. Beth stood alone in the kitchen for a moment, unable to think.

“Well, you better be ready to apologize when you come back!” she screamed in her empty house.

Chapter Five

Emma

Since the first November meeting of the WLBS, a week had passed in Whimsy – and a productive week, at that. By Friday night, the new Firefly Café’s exterior walls were mostly in place, the Beth situation had been addressed, preparation for Jake’s birthday party was about to go into full swing, and Emma carried a surprise for the women of the Whimsy Ladies Book Society. It was, in fact, tucked under her arm in a manila folder as she approached Agèd Pages. After an unfruitful trip “to Maw Maw’s storage pod” and a spat with Casey over the project that wasn’t due (as it turned out) until the end of the month, Emma had funneled all of her attention into making the group’s inaugural treasure hunt – *her* treasure hunt – one none of her successors could beat. So this was it. Tonight was her night.

Even from outside, Emma could tell that every light in Virginia’s bookstore was on, but when she tried to pull the door open, it didn’t budge. After a moment, she set her folder down beside a stone and scrap metal figurine of a plump owl, cupped her hands against the door’s oval glass panel, and pressed her face to her fingers. The front room was empty, but someone or something had tipped over a stack of hardback books resting on the desk, leaving behind a pile of protruding corners and bent pages. Emma didn’t wait to formulate her own theory before she balled up her fist and started pounding on the door. *Knock, knock, KNOCK. Knock-knock-KNOCK-KNOCK-KNOCK.* It took Virginia seventy-eight seconds to get the front room, turn the lock, and let her guest in.

“About time,” Emma complained, picking up her folder and then rubbing her sore knuckles as she stepped inside.

“I’m so sorry I left you all shut out there in the cold. I couldn’t risk leaving the door unlocked,” said Virginia. While she waited for Emma to smooth the creases out of her green velvet pants and size her up, the shopkeeper shifted her weight from side to side to side to side, dancing back and forth like a kindergartener waiting in line for the restroom. “The most terrible thing has happened. Come with me.”

With that, Virginia turned and darted out of the room, leaving Emma to trail behind and wish she could get away with huffing at the situation, as her daughter so often did. Teenagers just didn’t appreciate how good they had it.

Emma followed her host back through the store, until they emerged, as usual, in the Mystery Room. What wasn’t typical was what happened next. All three of the other members of the WLBS were already gathered around the card table with their heads bent low over Minerva. They looked up at her when she entered, each with a solemn face, and the back at the cat lying on her side in the center of table and mewing softly.

“Don’t worry too much about her,” Virginia whispered. “Minerva’s a drama queen. She just got a little booboo on one of her feet because she was too nosy to leave well enough alone.”

“What are you talking about?” Emma started to say, casting her eyes around the room on their way back to Virginia. That was when she noticed the broken glass on the floor under the one window that looked out, not on the fenced-in back yard, but onto Josephine Avenue. For a moment, Emma stared at the empty pane, wondering how she

hadn't noticed anything amiss when she drove past it before she parked in front of the store.

Running her fingers over Minerva's black and orange coat, Beth murmured, "It's just awful. Who would want to break into Agèd Pages and hurt this sweet kitty? I'm just glad she didn't need stitches."

"What exactly happened here?" Emma asked, finally lowering herself into one of the two empty seats. Although everyone else had their hands on the cat, she kept hers to herself, clasping the outer edges of folder.

"I'll tell you what happened," Virginia exclaimed. Her sudden increase in volume made Emma jump in her seat and even got Heather and Catherine to look up. "Coming up on two hours ago, I left the store to go grab some dinner, since we were going to have a meeting during my normal supper time, and when I came back, my poor little Minerva greeted me at the door, complaining bitterly. Well, at first, I thought she was moaning because I'd left her all alone, but when I bent down to scoop her up, I found a small shard of glass wedged into the pad of one of her front paws. Now, I knew there hadn't been any broken glass in here when I left. No, ma'am, not in my store. So I went a little crazy and started searching the store, dashing through each room until I came in here, and lo and behold, there was my window, all shattered across the floor. Let me tell you, when that breeze blew those ruffled curtains back toward me, I near about fell over, I was so shocked."

Out of breath, Virginia collapsed into the last empty chair, between Emma and Catherine.

“That’s about the time we showed up,” Heather added, reaching over the table and around Minerva to take Virginia’s hand in her own.

“You’ve haven’t even heard the strangest part yet, though,” Catherine said.

“What’s that?” Emma inquired.

“Whoever it is who broke in... they didn’t take anything,” said Beth.

“Oh! I didn’t tell you that part?” Virginia asked. The color seemed to be returning to her cheeks, along with a distinct gleam in her eye. “It’s true. It looks like someone just broke in, rearranged a few books, and left. Bethany here called the police for me, and the officers who came to take the report said they’d never heard of anything like it. There wasn’t much they could do since nothing was missing, so they left right before you got here. Isn’t that crazy? I mean, as much as I hate seeing my shop violated and my cat injured, I kinda love it!”

“Wait, what?” Emma said, cutting Virginia off before she could begin another sentence.

“Well, the police have no clue about the robbers! I mean, the not-robbers. Just think about it. The people, or person, or whatever, who broke into my store could be anybody, and we have no idea what they wanted. It could be teenagers. It could be kids. It could be some old geezer who thought he was locked out of his house. We don’t know! It’s like something out of a *Nancy Drew* novel. Plus, talk about great timing. We’re about to embark on a treasure hunt – an actual treasure hunt – and there’s a mysterious break-in at my store. Can y’all say, ‘And the plot thickens!’ or what?”

“And the plot thickens,” Heather, Catherine, and Beth said in unison. Then the three of them and Virginia looked at each other a fell to giggling. Or rather, Heather, Beth and Virginia giggled. At best, Catherine chortled briefly, since she never giggled.

Emma raised her fist to her mouth and cleared her throat. The noise startled Minerva, who stood up and jumped from the table. “Wow. That is quite a story,” she said, straightening the papers in her manila folder by rapping the bottom and left side against the table. “We have delinquents running around Whimsy, breaking into shops willy-nilly, for no reason whatsoever. That’s wonderful, and we can come back to that later. Now that you’ve mentioned the treasure hunt, though, I think it’s a good time for us to turn our attention towards that.”

“You’re right, sweetie,” Virginia said. Her eyes were on Emma, but she was snapping her fingers at her cat, as Minerva had fallen back to inspecting the broken glass with a puffed-up tail. “That *is* the reason we gathered here tonight. So, do you have our clues for us?”

Instead of answering right away, Emma flattened out the velvet bunching around her thighs again and wobbled to her feet. Once upright, she slapped her manila folder and hands down onto the table and leaned forward, so much of her weight rested on her damp palms. Then she simply let the moment breathe, remaining silent just long enough for the fine hairs on the back of her neck and along her forearms to register the mounting suspense and stand at attention. The other women all looked at her now, waiting, anticipating, each craving exactly what a treasure hunt offered: the thrills of adventure and secrecy and a break from the shared monotony of life in Whimsy. Emma could see it in the way Virginia licked her lower lip, in the faint upturned crescent that had replaced

Catherine's usual scowl. They sat before her, at her mercy, like wounded game at the other end of her shotgun. Not a single one seemed a match for any hunter worth her Browning, which Emma most assuredly was. After all, if there was one thing her daddy had taught her, and Maw Maw had later tried and failed to make her forget, it was how to handle a gun. So Emma let the women sweat a moment longer, and then she pulled the trigger at last.

"No, I don't have your clues," Emma replied. As she spoke, she flipped open the folder in front of her and bent up the corners of the papers inside with her thumb, so they sprang back down one by one, like cards being shuffled. "Not tonight, at least, because I brought you something much, much better. I made maps."

"Maps?" Heather asked, lifting one perfectly shaded eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

With a smirk, Emma lifted the papers out of the folder and held them against her stomach, the way Catherine probably did when she handed back graded tests. What teachers like Catherine never seemed to understand, as Emma did, was that the very act of hiding something made it more desirable than it ever was on its own. No one cared what score the kid two seats over made – not until someone like Ms. Fletcher went to all that effort to keep it confidential. A girl didn't grow up under the thumb of someone as remote and private as Maw Maw without learning that lesson.

"I mean exactly what I said: I made maps. As in treasure maps. I figured it would be nice to add a step to our little hunt, and to that end, I made treasure maps that should lead each of you to a set of clues, which will in turn lead one of you to my book, as you know."

Emma paused to take another glance at each of the women in front of her, evaluating the looks on their faces and giving them a chance to thank her. No one did, at least not in the three-quarters of a second she was quiet. They all just stared at her with expressions ranging from amused (Heather) and intrigued (Beth) to puzzled (Virginia) and constipated (Catherine), so Emma had no choice but to sigh loudly and rub at her eyes with the back of her hands, purposefully flashing the front side of the papers at the others. “Now, obviously I didn’t have to take time out of my own busy schedule to design these, but I thought you ladies would enjoy the extra challenge, since everyone was so excited about our game. I mean, really, I did it for all of you. Plus, you know how I feel about doing things halfway. It’s sloppy, and it leaves your hands idle, and I believe we all know what they say about idle hands. But if no one is interested...”

Emma’s voice trailed off, a wave receding back into the ocean with the day’s would-be catch, as she pulled the folder back open and pretended she was going to stuff the maps back inside. After that, it was simply a matter of waiting to see which of the other women would break first. The trick always worked on her children, and she saw no reason it wouldn’t work these four. Beth was practically still a child, anyway, and Virginia could certainly be mistaken for a child trapped in an adult’s body on occasion.

“Now, just hold on one second,” Virginia pleaded. The plump, aging blonde snatched at Emma and the folder, impelling the fat that sagged under her upper arm to sway violently. It had only taken her one-twentieth of a minute to crumble, far less time that it would have for Casey or even Amos.

“No one said anything about not wanting the maps, Emma,” she continued. “In fact, I do want them. I need them! I love the idea of maps. We all do, don’t we, ladies?”

Virginia twisted her head left to right to look at the other women, who each began to nod enthusiastically. In no time at all, they were even chiming in with a chorus of “Yes, we do!” and “Absolutely!”, exactly as Emma wanted.

It was almost too easy, manipulating this crowd. But then again, Emma had learned from the best. For her many faults, Maw Maw had been a master of bluffs and conversations engineered to her own advantage, and she’d taught her granddaughter well. All Emma had been required to do was watch and wait for the day she’d be able to use Maw Maw’s own ploys against her. It had taken her over half a decade, but those years of biting her tongue and taking note of every underhanded word that fell from Maw Maw’s lips had paid off eventually, and even now they were still doing Emma’s heavy lifting for her. In any case, what was a little harmless conniving between friends and book club members?

Emma straightened her back and smiled brightly, displaying nearly all of her teeth. “Well, alright then! I have a personalized map for each of you, so let’s get started!”

The other women watched and waited while Emma circled the table, rifling through the papers as she went. At Heather’s chair, she tugged out a crisp set of numbered instructions, in which she had replaced just enough location names and specific distances with vague descriptions to prevent Virginia, Beth, or Catherine from accusing her of tipping the scales in Heather’s favor. Once that map was out of her hands, she turned back and walked counterclockwise, so she reached Virginia next. The grid she handed her looked more like a true treasure map, with neatly drawn dashed lines and squares, although she had omitted a key to help Virginia figure out what they represented.

Before Virginia could question her about it, she continued on to Catherine, who received a piece of paper that looked less like a treasure map than it did a coloring sheet from one of the activity and puzzle books Jake had recently outgrown. At least Emma had included instructions, telling her to shade all the businesses starting with *T* red, all the town and county offices blue, and so on and so forth until she'd be left with only one black location – the place where Emma had hidden the clues. As far as Emma was concerned, that was the second of two unnecessary kindnesses she'd done for Catherine. The first, of course, had been giving her a map that could help her recover something of her long-lost inner child before her heart finished withering to the size of a walnut. Emma recognized premature severity-induced crow's feet when she saw them.

Finally, Emma approached Beth with the final map. It was a grid, like Virginia's, but messier, with unlabeled, unevenly scaled, and inconsistent boxes and lines that were supposed to depict the main part of Whimsy. She held it out, just out of Beth's reach.

"I just want you all to know, I put quite a bit of time and effort into making sure each of you gets exactly the type of map you should. Here you go, dear," Emma said sweetly. She handed the sheet to Beth and turned to face the rest of the ladies once again. "Now, be honest with me. What do you think? You love them, don't you? Oh, I just knew you would!"

Thus, with Heather and Emma beaming as Catherine, Beth, and Virginia bent over scraps of printer paper, the first and only treasure hunt of the Whimsy Ladies Book Society began.

Chapter Six

Heather

“Hey, are you alright over there?” Chris asked as he drove Heather and himself out of Whimsy town limits. Together in his dark green Land Cruiser, they approached the long steel bridge that would take them into the city. His question was the first thing either of them had said since they buckled their seatbelts and pulled out of their driveway.

“What? Oh, yeah, I’m alright. Just a little chilly is all,” Heather replied, her right cheek against her headrest so she could watch tree after tree pass – or rather, get left behind. Outside, the road’s bumpy, faded pavement was dry, since Whimsy and her surrounding areas were enjoying a crisp, cool day under a cloudless sky. Nevertheless, inside the vehicle, Chris had the air conditioning on and dialed to over half-strength, so artificially cold air pumped through the vents and pressed in the exposed skin of Heather’s arms and calves.

Something about that air seemed unnatural and drowsy, as if it contained slightly too little or too much oxygen. It stiffened Heather’s joints and muscles, paralyzing her, and at the same time, it made her want to throw open her door and leap from the car, to freedom. *This must be what diamonds and priceless works of art feel like,* she mused, *when they’re locked away in hermetically-sealed vaults and frigid little safe deposit boxes.*

“Sorry about that,” Chris said as he switched the air conditioning off. Heather turned her head over on the headrest just in time to see him throw a sidelong glance her

way before he had to return his eyes to the road. “But are you sure there’s nothing else bothering you? Seems like there’s something on your mind.”

“What do you mean?” Heather asked, fighting the urge to let her heavy lids close over her watery eyes. A dry cold always made her nose and eyes run, and it didn’t help that she hadn’t caught a full-night’s sleep in almost a week. Her pills helped her slip out of consciousness at bedtime, but she kept waking up around 2:00 AM and staring at the ceiling for over an hour. All that time spent looking up at the white surface had recently convinced her that she needed to have it painted. It reminded her of something Shelley had said, back in high school: that a woman could always judge her success in life by whether or not her ceilings were painted.

“Well, you’ve just been kinda quiet and pale recently.” As Chris spoke, three creases appeared on his forehead. In another life, a separate reality resulting from a different set of choices and circumstances, his wife might have reached out to smooth the lines away, but as things stood, Heather just watched and wondered how wide they would become this time. “Is everything okay at work? You know that if Higgins is being unfair or pushing you too hard, I can talk to him. Heck, I can fire him if you want me to.”

“No, work is fine,” Heather answered after a moment. Even to her ears, her voice sounded dull and flat.

“Well, then, what is it? A friend? The book club? Is that map Emma made you giving you trouble?”

“To be honest, I haven’t even looked over it all the way yet.”

Now Chris took a turn falling silent for a short spell. His knuckles whitened around the steering wheel before he opened his mouth again.

“Then, is it... It’s not... It’s not about the baby? Our attempts? You haven’t heard back from the doctor yet, have you? You would have told me if you had, right?”

Forcing a smile, Heather pulled her head forward from the seat, so she was sitting straight up. She tried to meet Chris’s eye as he glanced back and forth between her and the blue sedan ahead of them on the bridge. Every time the Land Cruiser’s tires hit one of the deep seams in the pavement, they made a loud whumping noise that had scared Heather as a teen, the first time she drove her father’s jeep over the lake and into the city. Now she hardly gave it a thought. It was just another song on the soundtrack of Whimsy.

“I haven’t heard a thing, honey,” she said, sparing him from the truth for several more days, “and I’m telling you, nothing’s wrong. I’m just going to miss you while you’re off in Houston, is all.”

“That’s good to know,” Chris said. The corners of his full raspberry lips sprung upwards, the two sides perfectly even, and the crinkles above his brows flattened out some, though they didn’t vanish completely. With his left hand on the top of the steering wheel, he slid his right one over to Heather’s seat and grasped her fingers. “But you don’t have to worry. I’m going to miss you too, Heather Feather. Do you remember the night we met?”

“Of course. How could I forget?” Heather replied automatically. This was like a code between the two of them, a call-and-response Chris initiated whenever he thought she needed comforting. It never worked, but over the years, she’d found that it was easiest to simply play along.

“It was a warm spring night, nearly seven years ago,” Chris began, his voice taking on a dreamy quality as they reached the end of the bridge and turned right, heeding

the large green sign that directing them down well-maintained streets towards the airport. Of course, if they had instead turned left or continued going straight, they would have been forced to drive through the poorest corner of the city, past crumbling brown brick storefronts and shotgun houses with peeling paint and long, scraggly grass. Once as bustling, generic, and forgettable as any other part of the city, the area closest to the bridge had been withering away for decades now, as if poisoned by proximity to the small, vibrant town across the lake.

“And my girlfriends and I had just arrived at what was already being called the party of the season,” Heather added, shifting in her seat to keep herself from pulling her hand back from Chris, “a black tie event in the courtyard of that new restaurant, Zoink!, which had been rented out by this big consulting firm one of the girls, Elaine, I think, was temping at. Apparently, the C.E.O.’s son had just been promoting to vice president, so the company was pulling out all the stops.”

Chris sighed dramatically, right on cue, as he followed another sign onto the highway. “Yes, which meant I was pacing back and forth by the stage, downing another glass of champagne and trying to make up the speech I was about to have to give, when all of the sudden, there was this loud thunk across the way.”

“Some clumsy girl had dropped her clutch, and its heavy metal snap made quite the clatter when it hit the brick floor,” Heather contributed, instead of warning Chris that he was about to cut off a red truck with mud-splattered doors and a large gun rack in the back. Behind them, the driver, a round balding man in his late forties, flipped them off and shouted something inaudible, but Chris didn’t notice. He was lost in the golden reflection of a past he had gilded himself.

“That’s exactly right,” he said, “so when I looked up, I saw the most gorgeous creature in the world reaching down to grab her purse, and by the time you straightened back up, I was hopelessly in love. Of course, you hadn’t even laid eyes on me at that point.”

Fibbing once again, Heather finished the tale as Chris turned onto their exit:

“Nope, I didn’t know you existed until you found me after your speech and charmed me into loving you back. And we’ve been living happily ever after since.”

“A great story,” Chris said with his eyes gleaming, as they always did when he and Heather told each other this narrative. “One for the ages.”

“Mmhmm,” Heather commented, nodding. She did agree with him: It *was* a great story. It just wasn’t a true one.

In reality, she had scanned the crowd as soon as she’d walked into the party, sizing up every eligible man in the place. Just three weeks prior she’d decided she was the postcard life – the caring husband, the great job, the picket fence, and the 2.5 clean-faced children who expended all their energy when they were their nanny during the day and quietly completed their prep school homework at night while their parents nursed a bottle of fine wine. She was ready to have everything a modern woman was supposed to want, ready to be envied and applauded for handling it all with grace and ease. So when her eyes had landed on Christopher Hartman, the gentle-eyed corporate heir whose starched dress shirt couldn’t hide the muscle tone of his upper arms, she’d thought, *He’ll do*. He was, after all, exactly what she’d been looking for: tan, blonde, built, and moneyed. The fact that he was single helped. The loud dropping of her purse? She’d

planned that, and it had worked like a charm, seemingly a sign that everything else in her soon-to-be perfect life would as well.

While Heather replayed her version of events in her mind, Chris navigated the rest of the way to the city's small airport, so they pulled up to the nearly empty drop-off curb just as her thoughts returned to the present. Chris looked over at her and swallowed visibly before he turned off the car's engine and said, "I can get my suitcase and my carry-on out of the trunk myself, so I guess this is goodbye for now."

"Already?" she asked, genuinely surprised to see a row of yellow taxi cabs on their left and automatic glass doors marked with the names of airlines on her right. Only two other cars were in the drop-off lane, a minivan surrounded by young children and orange-brown floral suitcases and an old blue clunker from which an anemic-looking teenage girl was emerging.

"I'm afraid so," Chris said, leaning in to kiss her. "The keys are still in the ignition, and you can go ahead and park the car in the garage when you get home. I'll call you when I land, okay?"

Heather gave him another second and then broke free of his embrace. "Yeah, alright. You'd better get going, though. You've got a plane to catch, and I have a lunch meeting scheduled to make up for taking the morning off."

"I know. I'm going. I'll be back in a couple days, like always, but you know I'll miss you. I love you, Heather Feather."

"Love you too," Heather answered. They shared one last hug before Chris hopped out of the vehicle, and Heather slid over into the driver's seat. She waited for him to pull

his black bags out and close the trunk. Then she waved to him one last time and then turned the key and pulled away from the curb.

Thanks to traffic caused by early eaters, Heather made it back to her house at 11:55, only five minutes before *he* was supposed to arrive for the quick lunch date she'd claimed was a business meeting. It actually was to be a meeting, of sorts – just not the type Chris had probably imagined when she mentioned it. After all, two people were going to meet, two bodies, to move together in a mutually beneficial direction and then join in a much-needed merger. If she weren't married to the vice-president of the company she worked for, the details of her little lunchtime rendezvous could even pass for legitimate and boring. What she had planned was going to be far from legitimate *or* boring, though. Or, it would have been, if she hadn't arrived to find Virginia sitting on her porch steps, knitting a complicated purple scarf that ran from the ends of her long metal needles to the open mouth of her large, bubblegum pink, battered-looking bowling bag. Loops of fuzzy yarn even drooped over the side of the purse, covering up some of the car decals Virginia had used as stickers, including the one that announced, “Bad grammar makes me [sic]!”

Needless to say, Virginia Garrison was not the person Heather had been expecting – and certainly not the one she'd had in mind when she'd slipped on a black lace thong and matching balconette bra under her high-waisted pencil skirt and shimmery pale blue blouse that morning. No, Heather had definitely ordered a lover for lunch, and instead, Whimsy had brought out a big plateful of gossipy old woman. Quite the kitchen snafu.

The younger of the two ladies pulled the car into the driveway, turned off the engine, and stepped out, her lips still parted with surprise and an intimate greeting cut short. After a tense moment, she managed to croak Virginia's name, but her voice cracked on the third syllable, too clearly to go unnoticed. Then, for the first time since she'd identified her visitor, Heather seemed to remember how to blink. Her eyelids flickered too quickly as they tried to make up for lost time.

"What are you doing here?" she asked sharply, combating the flight-or-fight instinct as it seeped into her muscles. It had already set her thoughts aflutter like a kaleidoscope of butterflies caught in a tornado. "Who's running Agèd Pages?"

Virginia leapt up from her perch and trotted over to Heather, abandoning her bag and knitting on the stoop. Her dry, crispy yellow hair was pulled into a frizzy crown bun reminiscent of '60s beehive, and her bright patchwork coat flapped open as she moved. "Hello! Hi!" she said cheerfully. "I'm sorry if I startled you. You look a teensy bit startled. I just thought it'd be nice to stop by for a little visit and talk about the treasure hunt, so I closed the store for a spell. I put a cardboard sign on the door and everything. May I come in?"

Heather glanced back at the street over her shoulder, taking stock of both directions, and then back at her guest. The clean gray sidewalks and well-manicured kelly green lawns up and down the block were empty, for now, but she was expecting *him* to arrive at any minute.

"You know, Ginny, now's not really the best time," she said.

"Oh, don't worry. I'll only take a minute or two, if you're busy, and I promise you'll have plenty of time to finish your lunch," said Virginia, who was already turning

and barging towards the house again. She nearly knocked over one of the decorative clay pots at the foot of the stairs as she passed, forcing Heather to scurry in her wake, tensed to catch swaying objects and set them back on balance. Before Heather could think of a good reason to turn the other woman away, they were at the front entrance, and with a flick of her wrist, Virginia turned the knob and took the liberty of pushing the door open. Heather had no choice but to scan the street once more and follow her visitor into her own home, through her own living room, and finally into her own kitchen.

As the pair sat down at the table, Heather said, “Okay, but I really do only have a minute.”

Virginia nodded and repeated her pledge of brevity. Then she said, “Here’s the thing: I’ve been thinking a lot about our treasure hunt and those maps Emma gave us, and I decided that it’d be more fun if I worked on it with a partner. And isn’t the point of conducting this hunt – or even being in a book club, for that matter – to have fun, together?”

“I suppose,” Heather said.

“Right, so I just came over to ask if you wanted to partner up with me! What do you say?”

“Me?” asked Heather. “Why me?”

Chuckling, Virginia set her elbow on the table and the side of her jaw in the palm of her hand, giving her the appearance of a disjointed ventriloquist’s dummy come to life. “To be honest, I settled on you through process of elimination,” she said in a stage whisper, as if confiding sensitive information. “Don’t get me wrong! I don’t mean that as a bad thing. I adore you, just like I adore all my other WLBS sisters, so it was a really

tough decision. When it came down to picking one of you, though, the fact of the matter was that I had no idea what kind of hours Beth worked on Mondays. And you know I try to give Catherine her space as a matter of principle. Bless her heart, but that girl has got to be part feral. You can't force your presence on her, or she'll retreat into some shady corner of her mind, and then who knows when you'll get a chance to see her again? Anyway, I knew you come home for lunch most days, and I figured you could tolerate a little unexpected company."

"Oh. Well, lucky me." Heather tried not to grit her teeth as she spoke, but she found it difficult to manage that and force her voice to be light and cheerful at the same time. All the while, she also had to keep an ear turned towards the street and an eye on the window behind Virginia, since *he* often came around back and entered through the kitchen, just in case Mrs. Lowry across the way was home with her sick kid or Mr. Fisher next door came home for a change of clothes at the worst moment possible.

"You mean, 'Lucky us,'" Virginia said. Before she could continue, though a knock at the front door interrupted their conversation. At the sound – three soft, rapid bursts of knuckles on wood – all sensation drained from Heather's face, and she jumped to her feet.

"One second," she breathed before dashing toward the living room. She slowed down only long enough to add, "I'm not expecting anyone," before she rounded the corner and ran to the door.

Sure enough, it was *him*, standing on her porch with the collar of his peacoat popped like a detective from a cheesy noir flick. "Hardboiled Harry" she would have

jokingly called him, if Virginia weren't sitting at her table two rooms away. They almost never used their real names with each other.

"You can't be here yet," she whispered frantically, cutting him off before he could say a word. "Virginia Garrison showed up all unexpectedly, and she is in my house right now."

Now it was his turn to pale. Hardboiled Harry fell back half a step, literally recoiling from Heather.

"What? Are you serious?" he asked, dancing from foot to foot with his right hand up next his face. He held his pointer finger at his temple and his thumb near his earlobe, so his extended middle, ring, and pinky fingers blocked one of the potted shrubs' view of his mouth and nose. He seemed to have shrunk over an inch in under ten seconds, as drawn into himself and slouched as he had become. "For how long?"

"I don't know," she breathed. "Could you just, like, drive around the block a couple times while I get rid of her? For God's sake."

Hardboiled Harry started to reply, but Heather held up a finger to shush him. She thought she'd heard something behind her, a shuffling noise, or perhaps a scraping. She swiveled around but saw nothing, so she turned back and stared at Hardboiled Harry with wide eyes. She didn't remember deciding to, but somehow she had ended up holding her breath as she listened for the slightest sound. Five seconds passed, then seven, then ten, and Heather began to relax, figuring that she had imagined it. When she put her finger down, Hardboiled Harry winked at her and teased, "I'll go for that drive. You just make up and story and shove that woman's ass out the door, alright?"

“Okay, babe, I’ll do that,” she said, laughing, giddy with relief. Her nerve ends still tingled with excitement and reminded her that *this* was what it meant to be alive. It was nearly averted disasters and stolen kisses, not sweaty hands held in the movie theatre or beds shared for more than a few hours at a time.

Heather closed the door and slipped back to the kitchen, where she found Virginia waiting in her chair with her legs crossed and her hands in her lap. “Sorry that took so long, Ginny,” she said sweetly. “Some lost out-of-towner needed directions. Poor guy had a wife and three kids waiting in the car. They’re doing some sort of cross-country road trip and somehow stumbled into Whimsy.”

Virginia peered down at her left wrist as if to check the time, although she wore no watch. Then she looked back up at Heather with a straight face, as if it never happened. “Oh that’s fine, dear. But I think I should get going. I need to get back to Pages, and, you know...”

She let the sentence trail off as her gaze found its way to the floor, and tendrils of dread began to unfurl in Heather’s stomach again. The younger woman took a second to internally reassure herself and steady her nerve and then she drew her lips into a patented Heather Hartman semi-pout and cooed, “Aww, well, I’m sorry you can’t stay longer, but I understand. Duty calls and what-not. Plus, we can talk about the treasure hunt some other time. Right?”

“Right, yeah, of course,” Virginia said, picking her bowling bag purse up off the tile beside her and rising to her feet. Heather walked her into the living room, where they exchanged goodbyes and shared a brief hug.

Then Virginia scurried toward the door and pulled it open, creating a long trapezoid on the carpet from the light streaming into shady curtained room. From behind her, Heather called out, “Well, you enjoy your lunch! Or your dessert, I guess, if you’ve already eaten.”

“Okay, you too,” Virginia squawked, right before the door closed between them.

“Sure thing,” Heather said, alone in her house, for the moment.

Chapter Seven

Beth

For reasons never truly explained, Dr. Grace Anderson, the owner of Whimsy's only full-time animal clinic, always gave Beth, her newest veterinary technician, every other Tuesday evening off and handled the final couple patients of the day by herself. Usually, Beth used the free time to shop for groceries or attempt to reach her parents in Belize or Haiti or Zimbabwe – whichever underprivileged country they were spreading Mueller cheer to that month – but on the Tuesday after the most recent meeting of the WLBS, she hurried home instead. She still had an hour or two of sunlight left, and, if she remembered correctly, a five year old pair of sneakers in brand-new condition in the back of the armoire she shared with David. The moment had come to finally break them out of the giftwrap, it seemed, because she had figured out Emma's treasure map.

As Beth darted down the blocks separating the clinic and her house with her head down and her eyes on the sidewalk, she began to review the wobbly depiction of Whimsy in her head. It had taken her several days to grab even a toehold in her efforts to decode the thing, since none of the lines and dots meant anything to her until she'd stared at Emma's handiwork long enough to tell the difference between the intentional and unintentional irregularities in spacing, between the purposefully crooked marks and the accidentally slanted ones. Finally, on Monday night, after David came home complaining about having skipped lunch, wolfed down dinner, and then passed out on the couch, Beth had sat up late at the kitchen table under a ring of fluorescent yellow light and puzzled

over the piece of paper until something shifted in her head and made Emma's scratches appear to dance and rearrange themselves.

Suddenly, the little squares near the center of the sheet clumped together in the same way the stores did on Main Street. The six biggest clumps represented the road's primary drag, which meant the dotted line running between them had to be the street itself. From there, the rest of the map had just unfolded before her, enabling her to trace the one bending but unbroken, solid line straight from her house to her destination.

Having reached her front door, Beth turned her little silver key in the lock and shoved the tight latch open. Then she rushed to her bedroom, where the blue and white striped comforter David had picked lay in a heap at the foot of their queen-sized bed. Beth wrestled the shoe box out of the bag of the armoire, pulled on the stiff white sneakers, and laced them up before turning around and scampering out of the room as quickly as she had entered it, leaving behind her a pile of wool sweaters that had fallen from the wardrobe to the floor in her mad search. Without another thought, without a moment's pause, she set out for the spot marked with a X.

Unfortunately, Beth's giddiness over decoding Emma's treasure map lasted exactly as long as it took her to reach Taft Park and realize that her WLBS sister had left her with seven acres of ground to search. Her infatuation with her new old shoes had only lasted half as long, dissolving onto the sidewalks of Downtown Whimsy as the back of her ankles became raw and began to bleed, but that glee, her excitement over decoding a treasure map and tracking down a lead, Nancy Drew style, didn't abandon her until she found herself standing under the park's iron wrought archway, being ushered onto a well-

mowed field long enough to meet the horizon. She almost gave up right then and there, without venturing any farther than the rose garden at the entrance of the park.

“Okay. No. You can’t just turn around and leave,” she chided herself quietly.

There was no one within earshot, but a couple was cuddling on a checkered blanket close enough to see her, to notice if she fled abruptly. She’d have to keep going, have to follow the narrow strip of pavement through the center of the park, past the amorous pair, and toward the sandpit, where children were scaling a jungle gym and trying to flip rubber swings over the pole.

With a bit of good fortune, Beth figured, she’d find Emma’s clues wedged between the wooden boards of a picnic table or pinned to a tree before the sun went down or she had to explain why she was loitering near a group of children alone to a band of protective mothers.

Twenty-five luckless minutes later, Beth reached the end of the paved walkway, having been forced to stroll past the sandpit full of kids and suspicious parents, past the stage, and even beyond the stone circle where people roasted hot dogs on the Fourth of July without finding a single clue. Lacking options, she ducked left behind the tennis court toward the belt of evergreens that bordered the edge of the park. Then, however, she froze mid-step, nearly losing her balance as she slid to a sudden stop in the mud upon finding herself facing a little brown dog that was sitting in a narrow clearing between the trees.

For a moment, she just stared, and it stared back, steady and calm but intent, like a lighthouse beckoning weary, waterlogged sailors from a sandy shore. Beth almost

thought she was imagining the whole thing, as she had hallucinated a stunning white horse trotting down her street when she had a fever in the ninth grade. Only the solid, earthy thump the dog's tail made against the ground as it began to slowly wag convinced her it was real. Her fake horse's hooves had been silent when they met the pavement.

The creature before her now was a mutt of some sort, with the color of a chocolate labrador, the sleek athletic legs of terrier, and the elongated body of a dachshund. Even from a distance, she could see that it was slim and toned, but looked well-enough fed. It didn't have a collar, though, despite Whimsy's strict regulations, and as she approached, Beth spotted a small nick in one of its pointed ears, as well as a fresh-looking cut on its snout. She couldn't help but wonder who, if anybody, the dog belonged to and what it was doing alone in the least-frequented corner of the park. The little thing might be lost or homeless. Either way, she reasoned, it couldn't hurt to find out. Bending her knees as much as possible without tipping over, she started easing herself toward it.

"Hello, little brown dog," she cooed, stooping to offer her hand as she drew closer. It remained seated, but wagged its tail faster in what could have only been an invitation. "How are you, baby?"

It occurred to her then that this was the first time Beth could remember calling anything or anyone except David *baby* since Canens had been taken from her, but she kept going. Something inside her, whatever it was that drew her to animals and allowed her to connect with them on a level far above what she could achieve with most humans, commanded that she approach this strange jackal-deer hybrid of a dog to make sure it was alright. So she went towards it, and when it turned and retreated into the woods before she could reach it, she followed it into the brush after only a moment of brief, yet

inexplicably profound indecision. This was her chance, she realized. This was her chance for something she hadn't even known she'd been waiting for, right here in this grassy tunnel of trees and shadows and sunlight.

Beth sidestepped a puddle near the opening in the pines and pursued the dog down a path she'd never seen before, trailing it by about fifteen feet. Within two minutes, it led her to a downed fence, a barbed-wire-and-wooden-post affair that lay flat against the ground and probably marked the border of the park, but she simply strode over it, preoccupied with trying to imagine what the corridor's creators had in mind when they cleared it. The thing was clearly manmade; Beth could spy bald, dirt-patch memories of tire tracks every few yards, and the bushes on either side of her had collected a museum of crushed Bud Light cans and torn styrofoam cups over what she could only guess had been years.

Now and then, as the pair wandered farther yet into this strange territory of bird caws and industrious insects and rivulets of silty water, the little dog would pause, sniff the air, and then disappear into the bramble. It'd pop back out seconds later and continue down the way, but as Beth passed the areas in question, she'd peer in, hoping to spot whatever had caught her furry companion's attention. Sometimes it was nothing, twice it was a tire that had been rolled out of the way, and one time it was an abandoned mattress and its torn, soggy box-spring partner.

The fourth or fifth time the dog ventured off the trail and into the woods, it didn't come out. Beth slowed, expecting it to leap back out, but when she caught up to where it had turned off, she found it looking back at her from break in the wall of trees – a narrower footpath that branched away from the main one and curved back toward the

park. Here, the damp foliage seemed to close around her, and she had to push thorny vines and leaves out of her way as she scrambled back over the broken fence, a little north of where she'd first crossed it. She was beginning to regret her decision to venture down the path, worrying that she was wasting what little daylight she had left chasing a neighborhood dog deeper and deeper into unfamiliar woods, when she stumbled into a clearing around a corner, and an abandoned shotgun house broke into view.

Beth's first impression was that the house had been burned, because the weathered wooden frame was black and the exterior walls gone. The grass around the hollow shell of a structure was knee-high, taller than the little dog, who had veered left in an unhurried pursuit of some forest animal's trail, however, and as Beth advanced through it, it became obvious that rain, not fire, had been responsible for darkening the timber. The interior walls and doors sagged under the weight of an unknown amount of time and an unspeakable amount of filth, but Beth could still discern a floral pattern in the faded wallpaper, and the soggy carpet bore no scorch marks.

"Brown dog! Little brown dog, come here," Beth called when she realized she'd lost sight of the pooch. When she heard a rustling to her right, she turned just in time to see it wander around a pile of everything that had once filled the house. The dog looked at her, but didn't come and went back to sniffing the remains of a striped chair cushion lying next to an empty Asprin travel pouch and a cracked blender at the base of the heap.

A few feet away, set off by itself, a child's plastic chair made to look like a stone Victorian garden chair sat erect in the grass, the only thing beside the house itself that hadn't yet fallen to its side. Beth went to it almost involuntarily, drawn by the idea of a forgotten childhood, outgrown and left behind by the adult its owner had undoubtedly

become by now, to which she imagined this chair had borne witness. A childhood that would have been bound to the past, had it not escaped the confines of time and come to rest naked and free and haunted in its purest form – its immutable, intangible essence – here in this clearing, where only squirrels and birds and a little brown dog could find it.

The next time Beth turned around, the dog was gone, the sun setting. With some reluctance, she retraced her way out of the clearing, through the woods, and across the park, leaving without having found the clues or even gotten close enough to learn anything about her new canine friend. She'd have to return the next day, and maybe the one after that. She couldn't exactly count on her luck at the moment, especially when it was impossible to decipher a coherent meaning from her afternoon of strange animal encounters and spontaneous decisions. Her best guess was that she'd hit her head sometime in the recent past, had tripped so hard that she didn't remember it or fallen so violently that it'd knocked something in her loose. In truth, that seemed about as likely as anything else that happened in Whimsy.

All Beth knew was that she'd experienced something she wasn't used to in that clearing: a certain stillness, a silence she heard not with her ears, but with her soul. It was the same thing she'd felt on multiple occasions when she was six years old, back before she'd had a name for it, as she sat on her bed and bathed in the warm spring afternoon sunlight streaming through her windows. Her thin, ruffled curtains would dance with every gust of the air conditioner, and sometimes, once she caught that feeling, she'd be able to follow it outside, into the small vegetable garden she'd helped her dad plant. There, she would sit cross-legged and smiling faintly, because it made every red tomato

look riper, every corn husk silkier. When she'd grown up a little, she'd learned that the feeling had a name, *tranquility*. And that's what she'd felt that day, in the clearing with the little brown dog. Tranquility. That's what she'd felt.

Chapter Eight

Emma

No matter how exciting the commencement of the WLBS's treasure hunt and how frustrating the fruitless trip to Maw Maw's storage locker on Casey's behalf had been, life went on, and if Emma wanted Whimsy to keep running smoothly, she had to as well. With that in mind, she woke before her alarm went off on Wednesday morning, slipped out of bed without stirring Brock, showered, and donned a calf-length flared skirt and a coral faux-wrap blouse that hid the couple extra pounds she'd put on with her test runs of the food for Jake's birthday party. With fifteen minutes left before she had to start breakfast and rouse the kids, she ducked back into her spacious master and riffled through her drawer of rarely used foundation bottles, hair clips, scented lotions, and eyeshadow brushes for the Clinique Pink Truffle lip liner for school board-related business. Then she curled the bottom of her short hair in and fastened a double strand of off-white pearls around her neck. The accessory and a handful of hazy memories were all she had left from her mother, Maw Maw's precious, infallible, weak, selfish daughter.

Once Emma got the rest of her family vertical, dressed, and fed, she herded the kids into the minivan and took off for Whimsy Elementary, where Jake hopped out without his Hot Wheels lunchbox, raced back to retrieve it, and then ran off to find his friends as gray-skinned administrator in an oversized windbreaker, Mrs. Bilner, puffed into her little yellow whistle impatiently. Next up for the Walters tribe was Whimsy Middle School, not-so-conveniently located in the opposite corner of town. While Amos

made absurd faces at Casey in the back seat, Emma turned the van around and cruised back down Prospect Street before turning onto Magnolia Boulevard, so she could check out the future Firefly Café. The denim-clad workers were just arriving, hardhats and toolboxes in hand, as she passed, but she noted with a twinge of regret that the wooden frame of a roof had been raised atop the wall beams, and the girts had been put into place. The project was practically ahead of schedule.

Shaking her head at her misfortune, Emma continued on to the middle school, dropped off Amos, and then drove across the street to Whimsy High School. There, Casey gave her a stern warning about not trying to find her, speak to her, or in any way interact with her on campus before she let her out near the front and then parked in the back lot, in the section reserved for school employees and board members. Looking out at her from under the awning behind the band room were Mr. Bob Hutchon, the school board's token black member and guard against accusations of a lack of diversity, and Principal Garcia, who ran his tie through his fingers anxiously as he waited for her to step out of the vehicle.

Even from a distance, Emma could see the edges of Principal Garcia's thick red mustache curve down as he frowned. The middle-aged school administrator wasn't Hispanic, as his name might have suggested, but distinctly Caucasian, with gingery hair and watery blue eyes. As far as Emma knew, though, no one ever asked him about it, since no thought they needed to. The general consensus among Whimsy parents and educators was that, as a young man of twenty, Principal Garcia had married a woman of Cuban descent and taken *her* last name.

Apparently, it'd been such a scandal around the town they'd lived in that Mr. Garcia had opted to remain Mr. Garcia even after the couple divorced three years later, solely to avoid the humiliation of being known as the man who changed his last name twice because of a woman. Such was the effect of exotic-looking, foreign-sounding females on certain stale, white bread men – and the power of the local rumor mill in some small Southern towns. Emma could only thank the Lord above that Whimsy wasn't so petty and gossipy. She'd hate for her children to grow up in such a judgmental environment.

“Good morning, Mr. Hutchon, Principal Garcia,” Emma called as she started towards the two men. Unable to resist, she used her best Spanish accent when she said *Garcia* and smirked, knowing the short, balding, red-faced man would never say anything to her about it, even if he noticed. Atop everything else, WHS's principal had been afflicted with a condition that made his ears generate prodigious amounts of wax and left him slightly hard of hearing.

“Emma! I'm so glad you're here,” Principal Garcia panted when she reached the men. “We are in full crisis mode. Holcomb resigned. He's moving to South America.”

Mr. Hutchon cast Emma a knowing, *what-can-you-do?* kind of look, which she didn't appreciate. They weren't buddies. There was no need for that level of familiarity. “I've told Principal Garcia here that there's no need to panic,” he offered in a low, soothing voice, “but he won't listen. Could you tell him this isn't the end of the world? There are plenty of English teachers in the unemployment sea.”

“This isn’t the end of the world,” Emma intoned, turning to face Mr. Garcia and wrap her arm around his shoulder. “Why don’t the three of us go for a little walk? You can tell me what happened, and we’ll see what Mr. Hutchon and I can do to fix it.”

The trio started to make their way down the open outdoor hallways, passing classrooms full of students settling into their seats. Mr. Hutchon and Emma remained on either side of Principal Garcia, who seemed to be near tears. With a little more coaxing, the principal started to narrate the whole scene, describing how the school’s long-term, part-time creative writing teacher had burst into his office the afternoon before and announced his intention to move to South America come the end of the semester. As they walked in front of a nearly empty classroom without bothering to glance in at the sole, teacher-shaped figure hunched over the desk at the front, he finally reached the end of his litany about what a bind Holcomb had left him in, prompting Mr. Hutchon to pat his shoulder sympathetically.

“So, I take it this was pretty unexpected?” Emma asked, withdrawing her own arm and letting it fall to her side.

His eyes widening, Principal Garcia stopped midstep, and Emma and Mr. Hutchon halted beside him, just past the open classroom door. “Unexpected?” he said. “Of course it was unexpected. Holcomb’s been at this school longer than I have, and he never mentioned one word about South America until yesterday.”

Mr. Hutchon thrust his hands into the pant pockets of his expensive-looking pinstriped suit and smiled playfully as he said, “You know, I heard the guy who invented the Slinky did something like that. He took all the Slinky money and just up and disappeared to Bolivia one day. Left his wife and six kids behind.”

The anecdote made Emma squint her eyes and mutter, “What?” but neither man seemed to hear her.

Principal Garcia simply mimicked Mr. Hutchon’s stance by shoving his own hands into his pockets and he rocked back and forth on his heels. “I don’t think that’s Holcomb’s plan, Bob,” he said. “But even if it is, we’re still going to have to find someone to take on his writing courses next semester.”

Emma’s thoughts began to meander as the focus of the conversation turned from the inventor of the Slinky, because, frankly, she found the entire issue of the writing vacancy tedious. It was just an art course, not something important like Algebra, American Government, or the religion classes she wished WHS offered. If taught properly, she reasoned, such a class could do wonders for the next generation of Whimsonianians, so many of whom seemed to have been led astray by the sex and violence they saw every day on TV and the internet and heard in their awful computer-generated music.

Personally, as a relic of a pre-iPod era, Emma was a good, church-going Methodist, just like her daddy before her. Of course, she’d never been sure which denomination her mother had favored, but she knew Maw Maw had raised her Baptist, just as she tried to raise her grandchildren Baptist after the state had requested that she step in as their guardian. Emma imagined that the Baptist doctrine of “perseverance of saints,” of irrevocable salvation after baptism, had offered some measure of comfort to the old bird in her waning years, since it meant that even a conman/thief of a husband and suicide couldn’t keep her daughter outside Heaven’s gates. Emma, on the other hand, preferred to think that the Baptismal bath alone wasn’t enough to save the arid soul of a

woman like Maw Maw from the heat of hellfire. Any remaining water would surely boil right off.

So that's where Emma's mind was – in Hell with Maw Maw – when a burst of unexpected movement on the edge of her range of sight caught her attention. Suddenly, Catherine, of all people, of all the teachers at WHS, emerged from the classroom behind Principal Garcia, Mr. Hutchon, and Emma, her limp black pants and loose gray cardigan swaying around her long, thin frame as she caught herself in the doorway. The nearly skeletal woman was flushed and had a strange look about her, something more than her usual dead determination.

If Emma had been the romantic type, sentimental like Virginia or Beth, she might have called it a spark or a twinkle in Catherine's eye. But it wasn't as simple as a pinprick of light, like in novels. It was more subtle, like energy, a new need, emanating from her center of gravity. For Catherine, whose center seemed to be unusually high for a woman, that was somewhere in her chest. Perhaps that was what always pulled the top half of her body forward when she took her quick, little, precise steps and why she appeared to be straining to keep her shoulders back. Maw Maw had been the same way, but Emma, with her wide, child-bearing hips, didn't have that problem. Her center of gravity was just below her waist, where it should be.

"I'll do it. I'll teach creative writing," Catherine squawked from the doorway abruptly. For a moment, as the November breeze began to pick up just enough to arouse goosebumps and cause any exposed skin to tighten, Emma, Principal Garcia, and Mr. Hutchon merely stood under the overhang and blinked at Catherine, not knowing what to say.

“Really? Are you sure you want to take on new classes?” Principal Garcia asked finally, right as Catherine started to repeat her offer. “Keep in mind, you’d probably have to give up one of your other classes and your planning period. I know how you like to have the first hour free to get organized.”

As he spoke, the little man peered up at his much taller employee so searchingly and with such intensity that, for a second, Emma felt as if Catherine might have been the girl who had humiliated and shattered him all those years ago. Mr. Hutchon, meanwhile, simply looked bored. Neither man seemed to realize just how preposterous the whole situation was, how much of a joke. It was bad enough that Catherine deluded herself into thinking she could ever write something worth reading, but now Whimsy – which might as well have been the whole world – was just going to play along, as well? Hand this frigid stick her dream job, when people like Emma had to work and campaign and bake to get on all the right boards, with only the interests of the town in heart?

“Yes, I’m sure,” Catherine said, coming towards the others. She was looking at Principal Garcia, but didn’t make eye contact, speaking instead to his bellybutton. Emma could see her hands shaking as she pulled on the hem of her sweater. “Because... well, just listen. At some point in college, I read a collection of short stories. I don’t remember what it was called or who wrote it now, but I do remember a phrase the author used, two words that have stuck with me ever since. They were *careful competence*. And even as a college student, those words had at once terrified me and soothed me in a way I almost couldn’t describe. They held the bittersweet comfort Los Angeles smog offers a returning native, because they were poisoned, but right and proper somehow. I felt like they’d always been a part of me, lurking just below the murky surface of consciousness. And

reeling them up, bringing them into my vocabulary, made me feel whole somehow. I'd recognized what the author was saying immediately, and that horrified me.

“Carefully competent. That’s who I am. That’s who I’ve always been. I’m complacent, and maybe I’m going insane, but I think it’s time I tried to change that. So, yes, Principal Garcia, I’d love to teach the creative writing classes.”

Finished, Catherine took a deep breath, glanced down at the gum-stained cement, and then looked back up at Principal Garcia’s stomach. Again, no one said anything right away, perhaps because Catherine had just used all the words. Something was going on with that woman. She wasn’t acting like Catherine – or rather, was acting like a version of Catherine with some guts and personality – and Emma didn’t like it. She had enough on her plate this month, without having to fix a crazy lady. So she held her tongue and stared at Principal Garcia, waiting for him to shoot Catherine down, primed to pat Catherine on the back and tell her, “Better luck next time,” before going home to forget about the whole thing.

But then Principal Garcia beamed and said, “Great! I’ll put you at the top of the list! Now, I’m not making any promises. As Emma and Hutchon here can tell you, you’ll still have to interview, of course – but I doubt that will be a problem. Right?”

He directed the last part at Emma and Mr. Hutchon without looking at them, apparently expecting an easy confirmation. Because of that, however, he didn’t see Emma’s hands clench or her ears redden. He didn’t notice how many times she tried to swallow the warm saliva that had suddenly filled her mouth, only to find her throat closed, as if blocked by anger.

“I don’t see why it would be,” Mr. Hutchon said with a smile, while Emma was still trying to quiet the sound of waves crashing against rocks in her head. She knew she had no reason to be this angry, but damn it all, she was. This was her town, and her school, and she couldn’t abide people like Catherine just changing things however they fancied.

As Emma counted backwards from ten, Principal Garcia and Mr. Hutchon shook hands, and Catherine nodded, wide-eyed, and darted back into her classroom. Seconds later, a recording of an old fashioned brass school bell ringing blasted through the round speakers set high along the wall, and pimple-faced students began to stream out into the breezeway. At once, Principal Garcia and Mr. Hutchon both melted away into the river of awkward, shuffling teenagers, leaving Emma to spin in place and try to reestablish her bearings.

She was still standing where the others had left her, jostled by bony elbows and low-riding backpacks, when Casey emerged from the crowd, screeching, “Mother!”

“Oh, thank goodness,” Emma said, struggling against the hormonal current to reach her daughter. “Which way is the parking lot? Somehow or another, I got all turned around.”

Red-faced and huffing, Casey grabbed her mother’s hand and jerked her down the hall and around a corner, into a shorter, less crowded passageway that dead-ended with two empty vending machines. Under the pressure of a double glare from both mother and daughter, the three students standing and talking in the corridor collected their belongings and left, shuffling toward the main passageway as quickly as the boy’s droopy shorts and the girls’ skintight jeans would allow.

“What exactly do you think you’re doing here?” Casey shrieked, turning around to glower at Emma with her hands on her hips. “I thought I told you that you and I were not – I repeat, NOT – to cross paths on campus. Are you trying to kill my social life?”

“No, it wasn’t anything so dramatic,” Emma began. Before she could get to her explanation, though, Casey held up her hand to stop her.

“Are you just trying to sabotage my entire life? I mean, come on! Wasn’t it bad enough that you somehow couldn’t find anything decent for my project? Now I’m behind schedule until you decide to get back out to the storage place, but instead of doing that, you’re loitering around my school, just waiting for one of my friends to see you and diagnose me with a terminal case of uncool! Why? Why do you hate me, Mother?”

“Hey! You cut that out, missy!” Emma shot back, grabbing her daughter by the forearm. Casey wriggled this way and that, trying to get loose, but Emma only tightened her grip and pulled Casey toward the wall. “That is no way to speak to your mother, and I know I raised you better than that. Now you tell me what precisely has gotten into you, and make it good, or else!”

At that, Casey rolled her eyes and let her arm go limp, like a wet dishtowel or a dead rabbit, in Emma’s hand. When Emma tried to shake it, the rubbery appendage just wiggled back and forth, giving her little satisfaction.

“Or else what? You’ll go and tell Daddy, and he’ll pretend to be all stern and mad until you leave the room? Oh yeah, real scary, Mom. I’m just terrified.”

“You... I, I oughta whoop you,” Emma stammered back. She could feel her hands trembling with rage, sending fierce vibrations up her forearms towards her shoulders, so she dropped Casey’s wrist.

“Yeah, I’d like to see you try,” Casey retorted before she pirouetted out of Emma’s reach and pranced backwards down the hallway. “Now I’ve got to get to class. I suggest you head home before you completely wreck my reputation.”

Casey disappeared around the corner, mixing back into the trickle of students still making their way to their next classes. After the last of them passed, Emma remained alone in the covered walkway for several minutes, fighting back the devastated, infuriated, hostile, humiliated emotion threatening to spring forth from her eyes as so many warm, salty tears. With only her sniffing to listen to now, she found herself longing for the irritating scuffling of rubber soles striking concrete that had filled the space mere moments ago. The sound had reminded her of teenagers’ general sloppiness in demeanor and dress, but also concealed her weakness from her own ears.

Once Emma got her tears mostly under control, she bent her head and started back the way she’d come, staring at her feet for the first dozen or so steps. As she approached the first in a row of closed doors, however, she finally dared to glance up. Immediately, her damp gaze met Catherine’s dry one through the window of the latter’s classroom.

Standing before a full thirty students, Catherine nodded to Emma, who ducked her head once again and hissed a curse while she sped past.

“Of course Catherine would see me,” Emma muttered as a bitter taste rose up from the back of her throat. “And now she gets to have a nice little laugh at Emma Walters’s expense. Well. She better enjoy it while she still can.”

Chapter Nine

Heather

Against her better judgment, Heather waited three days to visit Virginia. Unable to live with the uncertainty – the struggle between the half of her that was sure Virginia had discovered her secret and the half that laughed off the idea – any longer, she skipped lunch on Thursday to stop by Agèd Pages and get a read on the woman she thought of as her “oldest friend” (for Virginia was the oldest female in Heather’s social circle). However, in her resolve to find her answer right away, Heather forgot about Mr. Evans. As a rule, it was never a good idea to forget about Mr. Evans.

Heather marched down the sidewalk to the store’s faded, beaten mailbox and turned onto the cracked stone pathway that stretched across the patchy lawn, forming a crumbling, tilting trail between uneven lines of listless petunias, vivid orange and red daylilies losing strength, and purple touch-me-nots near blooming. Loping up the wooden porch steps and into the front room of Agèd Pages, she came face to back of shiny, bald head with the town’s worst-tempered old man. As soon as she saw him, all the muscles in her arms, back, and upper legs tensed, instinctively trying to drag her backwards toward sweet escape before anyone noticed her. But then the tarnished bell above her head clanged – extra loudly, as if out of brassy spite, – and Mr. Evans swiveled in place, locking his small, beady eyes on her.

Mr. Charles Evans, age seventy-two, was one of those iconic Whimsonian whom everyone in the area seemed to know and consider as something akin to the frowning,

walnut-faced great-uncle-in-law who only appeared for the family's annual holiday gatherings and, year after year, spent the entire evening sitting by the Christmas tree, guarding the presents underneath. Over the decades, neighbors and acquaintances alike had learned to either despise the man or tolerate him in flagging resignation, many without ever speaking a word to him. Truly, Mr. Evans was part of Whimsy the way the old bronze statue of the town's semi-legendary founder, Humphrey Oscar Lawrence Lindon Odell Whimsy, out in front of the pharmacy on the corner of Main Street and Live Oak, was part of Whimsy. The way the Butterfly/Firefly Café and the Old Courthouse off Josephine Avenue were. And everybody in a ten-mile radius knew that on Thursdays, around noon, he could be found in one place and one place only: the front room of Virginia's store. After all, Mr. Evans was a regular at Agèd Pages, though only in the loosest sense of the term.

Over the years, his visits had become a source of much distress for Virginia, who often started WLBS meetings by summarizing her latest encounter with him, while the other women tittered and groaned in a mixture of sympathy and boredom. The stiff-walleted Vietnam veteran couldn't technically be considered a customer, but was more a reliable guest or a shop nuisance – the poltergeist of Agèd Pages, more or less. Once a week, as predictably as the lunar cycle, he would materialize in the store while Virginia had her back turned or her nose hovering over financial records. Then he'd limp to the center of the room, always with the same sneer and the same question already forming in his throat, and cough into a stained handkerchief three times (never more or less). After a tense beat, he would demand to know whether or not Virginia had gotten rid of “that heathen literature with the witches and demons and vampires” yet. Finally, with his

sagging red earlobes swinging like fleshy pendulums, he'd conclude his visit by delivering a fifteen minute lecture on the evils of the *Harry Potter* series, *Dracula*, or the latest Stephen King novel.

Now here he was, five-foot-three with a ring of gray hair, sunken cheeks, and a curved back. His jaw hung loose from biting off some acidic word mid-syllable when he'd heard Heather enter, and Virginia was planted on the opposite end of the room, having taken cover behind the front desk. Her damp bangs had sagged down over the hump in her nose, so she had to shake the hair out of her eyes like a sheepdog, blink rapidly, and then squint before she gave Heather a weary half-wave that started below her elbow. Three other customers – a wiry young man wearing rimless glasses and an athletic-looking woman clasping hands with her preschool-aged daughter – were trapped in the room, motionless, almost pressed against the book-lined walls.

“Oh, dear!” Heather exclaimed, forcing her gaze to the floor and then to Mr. Evans's chin in a conscious show of feigned submission. “Am I interrupting something? I'm so terribly sorry.”

She also unwound her vowels and began to stress the first syllables of her words in that certain way that so pleased Southerners of retirement age. To her ears, the dialect made her speech sound like big-boned drunk with a lame leg, dragging and shuffling his bad foot along as the good one clunked across the wooden floor in long, heavy strides. But it got Mr. Evans to sigh loudly and shove his handkerchief back into his pants pocket.

“It's just the same,” Mr. Evans grumbled as he shot a dirty look Virginia's way. He began moving towards the door, and Heather had to step out of his path. “I can see I'm not making a dent here, anyway, and I know when I'm not welcome. Perhaps I'll go

find myself a different store to offer my free and valuable advice to, a store whose owner is a little more flexible and a lot more concerned about the welfare of the community, not to mention her own immortal soul. The lord told me to find the lost, hear for the deaf, and see for the blind, but he didn't say one word about mule-headed temptresses who wouldn't listen to reason if it had a bullhorn and a wagonful of firecrackers."

As Mr. Evans reached for the door handle, Virginia's eyes and cheeks brightened back up, and she bounced out from behind the counter. Smiling widely, she called, "So I'll be seeing you next Thursday, around noon?"

"Exactly right, you will," Mr. Evans snarled, a second before the door slammed closed behind him. As soon as it did, the other customers each visibly relaxed, letting their shoulders slump into a more natural posture. The woolen sweater-clad man removed his glasses to wipe them clean, giving Heather a chance to decide that he was fairly cute for a geeky guy of about thirty. She might have done him in college, if she needed someone to take her chemistry final for her.

"Heather! How are things?" Virginia chimed, trotting over to Heather.

"I'm alright, all things considered," Heather said. "But did I mishear, or did Mr. Evans just call you a temptress?"

Virginia gave it a moment of thought, peering up at the ceiling and sliding her lower jaw back and forth, so her top and bottom teeth scraped against each other. After a second or two, she began to nod. "Now that you mention it, I think he did," she answered.

"And you don't find that the tiniest bit strange?" Heather asked slowly. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see all three of the other customers head for the door, empty-handed.

“Not really. The thing is, it’s Mr. Evans, and you just got to let Mr. Evans do his Mr. Evans thing. Honestly, nothing that man says fazes me too bad anymore. I’m sure he’s just trying to follow the path laid out in the good book, and we all know how hard that can be sometimes. I think he’s just a little misguided, is all.” Here, Virginia took Heather’s long, thin hand in her own pink one and squeezed it tight. “Which isn’t to say he hasn’t gotten a phone call or two from the big man upstairs. But, if that’s the case, he’s sure got some terrible reception. AT&T, if I had to guess.”

“Right...” Heather ventured. “Listen, I don’t know if this is a good time, but I wanted to talk to you about something.”

Virginia’s face went ashen abruptly, and she dropped Heather’s hand, freeing herself to tug on her right earlobe and pick invisible lint from her dress at the same time.

“Virginia?” Heather tried to coax, but her typically honey-coated voice came out of her swelling throat reedy and pleading.

“Actually, I’m not sure right now works for me,” Virginia said, watching the door over Heather’s shoulder. “I just had Tim over for tea not half an hour ago, and someone from Winston’s Windows and Doors will be showing up at any minute to put in a new pane. I’d really better head on back to the Mystery Room and clear up the dishes.”

Before Heather could open her mouth to reply, the bell rang behind her, and sure enough, she turned to see a middle-aged man holding a gleaming metal toolbox in the store’s entrance. Without hesitation, he introduced himself as Mr. Roy Winston of Winston’s Windows and Doors and extended a hand. While Virginia took hold of it, pumping it with a level of eagerness that no doubt mystified Mr. Winston, Heather took stock of the man himself. He looked to be about five foot ten or eleven in his black

Oxfords, sported a small beer gut that his white button-up shirt couldn't quite hide, and had large brown hands that appeared surprisingly uncallused for a repairman.

“Well, sir, if you give me just one minute to say goodbye to my friend here, I can show you to the Mystery Room right quick,” Virginia said, pulling up the left side of her mouth as she turned back to Heather.

“Actually, I'll just go back with you,” Heather offered brightly.

“You don't have to do that. I'm sure you have places to be getting to.”

“Not at all,” Heather said, her smile a little tighter now.

“Fine. Have it your way,” Virginia said, as her eyes narrowed. In one big flourish, she spun around and stalked out of the room, leaving Heather and Mr. Winston no option other than to trail her wordlessly. Soon, the three of them were standing on the edges of the Mystery Room.

“One second. I have got to clean up these dishes before you set to work,” the older woman restated. Leaning over the table, she scooped up all the serving plates, saucers, and cups she could fit in an armload and then started for the back room that served as an office, kitchen, storage room, break room, and private quarters for Minerva.

“Mrs. Garrison?” Mr. Winston said to Virginia's retreating back. “Mrs. Garrison, you know, the sooner you show me where this window is, the sooner I can get it fixed and get on with my day.”

“Hold on just one second, sugar” Virginia yelled in reply, although the noise of silver tea spoons rattling against each other nearly drowned out her words as she hurried away. For her part, Heather remained behind, in the Mystery Room, and fought the urge to shout.

A minute later, Virginia reappeared, panting, in the doorway. Heather looked over at Mr. Winston, who simply crossed his arms over his chest and waited.

“The broken... window... is... Hoo! I’m not quite... the greyhound I once was... am I?” Virginia choked out. She let her head fall back on her neck and stared at the ceiling with one palm on the doorframe and the other on what she always insisted had once been a rather small waist. While Virginia tried to recover her breath, Heather chided herself for following the piddly scene to the back of the store without any sort of plan, and Mr. Winston glowered from the other end of the room. His expression struck Heather as the facial equivalent of tapping one’s foot impatiently. She was impressed.

“Mrs. Garrison, if you would *please* direct me to the window?” The repairman delivered his second supplication slowly, with obvious effort. Nevertheless, his voice – a powerful bass when he walked into Agèd Pages – had risen into baritone range.

Lifting a loose fist to her mouth, Heather stifled a laugh that was rising from her diaphragm because she knew what Mr. Winston could not.

“Of course, Mr. Winston,” Virginia said her most heavily sugared tone. “But I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to move aside. You’re standing in front of it, you see.”

“In front of what?” the repairman asked.

“The broken window.”

With a bemused smile, Heather watched Mr. Winston twist around and come face-to-face with the laminated poster Virginia had tacked over the empty window frame. The sheet, years old, curled around the pushpins at each corner and listed the ten steps to becoming a better reader, all ten of which were *READ!* Red-faced, the balding, mustached man began to dismantle the makeshift cover right away, carefully pulling out

tack after tack and laying it on the fold-out table between him and the ladies. Next, he reached for his tool box, fished out a measuring tape, and started to check the size of the window frame.

In the meantime, Virginia glanced over at Heather, as if to share a chuckle, just the two of them. As soon as the older woman saw her friend's mouth open, however, she seemed to divine the question hanging on Heather's lips and quickly returned her gaze to Mr. Winston. Heather sighed and wondered how much time she had left in her lunch break, how many more minutes she could spend waiting for Virginia to give her a chance to get her to confirm her suspicions.

"So, Mr. Winston, you fix a lot of windows, right?" Virginia asked, a little loudly, almost wildly. "Or you have, in your career as a window repairman?"

Mr. Winston grunted an affirmative, and before Heather could redirect the conversation back to Monday's events, Virginia pressed on.

"I'd imagine that a good number of them were the result of break-ins, wouldn't you say? So you'd know a bit about the whole smash-and-grab process? Not first-hand, of course. You're not a burglar, obviously, but just from cleaning up the messes they leave. Is that... does that sound correct?"

As Virginia spoke, she grasped her left elbow with her right hand and began kneading it vigorously. Her anxious motions kept getting more and more exaggerated, like those of a bad actor in a community play, and it was becoming clearer by the minute that Heather was Virginia and Mr. Winston's captive audience, unable to leave early and prevented from participating.

“Yeah, I suppose so,” Mr. Winston informed the window. “Me and my boys hear our fair share of stories from our customers, I guess.”

“Right! Exactly!” Virginia nodded toward the repairman’s head, while Heather pulled a chair out from under the table and sat down, defeated. “And the intruders, are they ever just, y’know, people?”

At this, Mr. Winston finally turned three-quarters of the way around to level Virginia with a long look. “Well, yes, the intruders are almost always *people*, ma’am,” he said.

“I know! I know that! Believe me, I’m sure most of them are human beings, like you say, but what I mean is, are they all criminals, or are some of them just people like you and me, who maybe fell on some hard times? Are the window-breakers ever, say, an old man who lost his job and son and has to take care of little grandson? Who just wants to read to little Jeremy at night, but can’t afford any books? Does that ever happen, do you think? Do they ever just break in, read a bedtime story, and put the books back?”

“An old man reading a beddy-bye story to his grandson?” Heather interrupted, her shoulders shaking laughter. “Come on Virginia, what do you think this is? A Lifetime movie? You think somebody broke your window for any other reason beside to be a prick and destroy stuff at another person’s expense? That’s the reason people do three-fourths of everything.”

Virginia cast her gaze to the ground and, in a small voice, pled, “Mr. Winston?”

“Well, I can’t say that’s never happened,” Mr. Winston said, “but I sure ain’t ever seen it.”

“Then what good are either of you?” Virginia huffed as she exited the Mystery Room, leaving Heather and Mr. Winston of Winston’s Windows and Doors to stare at each other in speechless silence.

Chapter Ten

Beth

Beth made a fourth and final trip to Taft Park on Saturday morning, only three days after her initial visit and the romp through the woods after the mysterious brown deer-dog. Thus far, each trip had failed even more miserably than the one before, forcing her to retreat home, shoulders slumped and feet tripping reluctantly across the sidewalk, without having found either the clues or her former canine companion. Still, she persevered, to the extent that the sun had only been shining on quiet little Whimsy through the post-dawn mist for an hour when she set off down Fulton Avenue on the first day of the weekend.

Her arms swinging at her sides, Beth walked briskly and only stopped once, in front of the Old Courthouse, which sat on a piece of public property so sizeable that it sprawled across an entire block in one direction and nearly a block and a half in another, joining Fulton to Josephine by way of two other roads whose names Beth didn't know. No matter how much of a hurry she was in, the young woman always felt compelled to stall there a moment and wonder what the inscription on the venerable stone building's architrave – *Animus Conscius Se Remordet* – meant. But, having received no miraculous illumination, she pushed on after a moment and, seven minutes later, crossed under the archway to the park's entrance once again.

Instead of rushing past the postcard-perfect scene as she had before, however, Beth also paused at the mouth of manicured lot this time, finding her body and mind both

stilled by how different, how new and unsullied, Taft Park looked and felt in the gentle light of sunrise. Although she hadn't realized it during her previous visits, she remembered then how heavily the air had weighted upon her before, humid with an entire day's worth of children shouting, lovers daydreaming, and mothers gossiping in the shade by the sandpit. It had hung low as if it had been polluted by too many moments from so many people's lives, too much mortal drama and joy. Today, by contrast, Beth was alone in the park, the first human trespasser, and no such force compressed her. Along with the trees, the grass, the sparrows in their nets, and the worms in their damp, dark ground, she could breathe, really breathe, unnoticed and unassailed by the eyes and ears and voices of other people, unhindered by the pressure of their lives and their expectations for once. This was a place at peace, and Beth wanted to be a part of it for as long as the world beyond the park gate kept spinning and squeezing and trying to suffocate her.

Without meaning to, Beth forgot at once about the WLBS, the treasure hunt, and the clues that might keep her in the book club, if she proved herself by finding them. Instead, she let the sights and sounds of the park fill her mind as she veered left and tiptoed through the rose garden. Before long, she found a bench nestled among bushes of white, lavender, and peach flowers, and her entire being folded into the seat then, so that her spine kissed the swirling leaf design of the bench's wrought iron back. She tried to think of another time her head had been so comfortably empty. Even in the clearing in the woods, the park's other plot of magical land, she'd had something to think about and someone to be. But here she could be nobody.

She could be a hollow chime blowing in the wind, an inanimate part of an eternal setting. She could close her eyes and remember Canens, before the accident, before he'd

gone to his new home. How easily she and David had exchanged jokes and light touches before then, and how the three of them – Canens, David, and Beth – had been sitting on her couch together the first time David told her he loved her. Canens had been curled up on her lap, asleep and content, Beth was in the middle of describing the way she and a childhood friend used to pull the pale green caps off budding golden poppies, when David suddenly grinned that crooked grin of his and blurted it out. Somehow, that moment was the only thing this quiet garden brought to mind. Canens and pre-Whimsy Davd were the only things left when all the other clutter had been cleared out of her brain.

How long Beth remained like that, eyes shut, a white rose brushing against the thin cotton-blend covering her upper arm, she could not tell, but when she returned at last to an awareness of time and space and self, it was not because she wanted to. It was because of a voice. An unexpected, but extremely familiar voice.

“Beth! Beth Mueller! Is that you I spy in the roses?” Mrs. Garrison called from the sidewalk Beth’s bench faced. The sound forced Beth to open her eyes to see Mrs. Garrison waving widely from the other side of the garden – a spectacle that made her groan inwardly while she tried to keep herself from blushing. She hadn’t realized she was visible from the street.

“No, no! Don’t get up! I’ll come to you!” the enthusiastic intruder continued. Beth watched Mrs. Garrison’s stiff flaxen hair bounce toward the archway and then through several rows of roses before she appeared again in her tight khaki capris, dancing into view with a lock-kneed sliding jig that almost could have passed for jogging, if Beth

had been squinting. Finally, she squirmed over toward the bench and collapsed into it, panting.

“Oof. I’m sorry, dear. You’re going to have to give me a minute to catch my breath. I lost a couple pounds this past month, so I dug up these old capris, thinking they’d fit again, cold ankles be damned. Was that ever a mistake! Take my advice, honey. Just because you can squeeze yourself into something again, that doesn’t you should leave the house in it. I’m going to have to cut myself out of these bad boys.”

Mrs. Garrison rushed this all out before falling into a rasping wordlessness that left Beth staring at her painted pinky nails. Each red coat bore shallow notches that looked suspiciously like teeth marks.

“That’s very... interesting,” Beth ventured at last when her companion’s wheezing began to subside into silence. “I’m always happy to see you, but if you don’t mind my asking, what, uh, brought you to the park this early in the morning?”

“I decided to take the scenic route on my way in to Agèd Pages this morning. I’ve been trying to lose some weight, you see, so I thought a little extra walking would be in order. That’s why I was hustling down this particular street, thinking to myself that I really ought to set the town a’talking by just burning these blasted capris and prancing around in my skivvies for the rest of the day, when, lo and behold, I spotted the WLBS’s own little miss Beth Mueller hiding in the roses, almost blending in with that pretty little face. Naturally, I had to come over and say, ‘Hello.’”

Mrs. Garrison patted Beth’s knee as she spoke, but twisted her face and shoulders the other way so she could reach out to grasp a rose bud that was leaning against the

bench's metal arm. Then she slowly wrapped her hand around its stem, thorns and all, and stretched it toward her hunched form, her lowered face.

"Oh! Hey! Be careful!" Beth, feeling the flower's spikes pierce her own skin in sympathy. "You'll prick yourself."

"I don't mind."

"But you might scratch yourself or get an infection. It could scar." The words sounded frantic, even to Beth's ears, and she immediately hated herself for saying them. She didn't usually worry so, but for whatever reason, she couldn't bear the thought of something permanently marking Mrs. Garrison's skin, altering one of the women of the WLBS before Beth could finish learning them in her slow, faltering manner.

"Perhaps. But the way I figure it, that's what life's all about, anyway. When you get down to it, all we're doing is racking up pink slips and scratches and scars so that one day, if we're lucky, we'll be sitting around in an old folks' home, swapping stories with other dried-up cronies, and we can roll up our sleeves and say, 'You think that's impressive? Get a load of this!'"

Mrs. Garrison straightened her back now and turned around to look Beth in the eye as she brushed her palms off against each other. She smiled mischievously, not with her mouth, or even her eyes, but with her whole face. Her entire body seemed to lift into the expression, and she squeezed Beth's left knee once again, more tightly this time.

"And besides," she said in a stage whisper, "any pompous pseudo-intellectual can tell you that you should stop and smell the roses, but not many have the guts to take the whole thing in hand, petals *and* thorns, and embrace it in all its natural glory. Most people want the synthesized, neutered, safe flower-shop experience, even if it only gets

them the smell of cardboard and cologne. That's not me. I know full well you have to bleed a little to get the real deal sometimes, and I want the real deal.”

Beth tried to pay attention to Mrs. Garrison, but despite her efforts, when she looked at the energetic woman wearing too-tight capris and talking faster than any other Southerner Beth had ever met, she couldn't keep her mind from drifting back to one of the first conversations they'd had. Beth had arrived early for her first WLBS meeting, and Mrs. Garrison had filled the time with a brief autobiography.

In seventeen minutes, she told Beth about how she'd lived in Whimsy her entire life, attending WES and then WMS and finally WHS before starting to work as a secretary at one of the law firms in the city and meeting Steven Garrison. Her parents had never been poor, per se, and she'd never gone without anything she'd truly needed. Her mother, Irene Lester, was far from the only Whimsy wife holding a part time job in the 1950s. She probably wasn't even the only one who sat at the kitchen table every night, scouring the Pennysaver and cutting coupons by lamplight. For the most part, apparently, Mrs. Garrison (or little Ginny Lester, as the neighbors called her at the time) and her older sister couldn't complain. But there were small things. The type of things children have a knack for noticing, despite their parents' efforts and hopes, such as how many times her mother would let down the hem of a dress before replacing it, or the way her classmates each bought new white shoes for the third grade spring recital, while she wore her sister's apricot loafers, still wet with the off-white shoe polish her father had applied the night before.

Beth remembered all of these details, but what she recalled most vividly was something Mrs. Garrison had said off-hand near the end of it. She'd told Beth that she

had a functioning knowledge of every lot and street of every square mile of Whimsy, MS – all 6.87 of them – and had even grown up in a small two-bedroom house only six blocks from her current home on Holly Drive. Now, for no reason she could guess, Beth couldn't forget that fact and thinking that those six short blocks must have been crucial. After all, those six blocks embodied five decades of moving through life and love and gain and loss. They separated the shores of Mrs. Garrison's current life from those of her childhood.

“Hey, whatcha thinking?” Mrs. Garrison asked. Startled, Beth looked up from her lap to find her book club comrade squinting, either into her face or against the sun still low in the sky behind her head. She searched her mind for a mental bookmark, some indicator to tell her where she'd left off in this now foreign exchange, but what scraps she could recall in an instant were of little help. Mrs. Garrison had said something about... scarred roses? Neutered old people? That didn't make any sense.

“I'm sorry. What?”

“You got all quiet and looked like you were concentrating on something serious. Is everything all right? You can tell me if something's bothering you, you know.”

“Oh, no. I'm fine,” Beth said as she scrambled to rearrange her face into something that could pass for casual and light-hearted – into an expression Heather Hartman, for instance, would wear convincingly. This, too, failed. “I'm just wondering what to do with myself between now and Emma's party.”

Mrs. Garrison's face cleared instantly, sending a tickle of electric guilt down Beth's spine. At the sight of such apparent, trusting concern on Mrs. Garrison's part, she couldn't help but regret having worried the matronly woman in the first place.

“Oh, you’re going too? Excellent!” Mrs. Garrison said. “While we’re there, you can tell everyone the good news!”

“What good news?” Beth asked.

“That you found the clues for the treasure hunt, of course!” Mrs. Garrison stood up and pointed to a pink rosebush across from Beth, who leaned forward and noticed for the first time a folded scrap of paper tied to the base of the plant with a frayed ribbon the same color as the buds. Her eyes widened, and she could feel her heart beat speed up. There was no way that had been sitting across from her the entire time without her noticing it.

“Truth be told,” Mrs. Garrison said, “I was hoping I’d spot them when I decided to walk by the park, but it looks like you got to them first. They’re your clues, fair and square. Assuming those *are* the clues.”

Mrs. Garrison continued offering her congratulations, but Beth heard no more. She walked over to the rosebush and kneeled in front of it, deaf and blind to all else around her. When she pulled at one end of the ribbon, the bow came apart, dropping the slip of paper into her open palm. After a moment of stillness, she looked up and around for Mrs. Garrison with several questions on her lips, but found herself once again alone. Like the little brown dog in the clearing, Mrs. Garrison had disappeared.

Her fingers shaking, Beth looked back at the piece of paper nestled in her cupped hand, pushed it open with two fingers, and stared at the squiggles before her. Then she smiled.

It was Emma’s handwriting. It was the clues.

Chapter Eleven

Emma

For the first half of the month, Whimsy, Mississippi, had experienced its proper November weather. The daily mean temperature declined steadily from 59.5° F on the 1st to 44.5° F on the 15th. Every week, the sweaters Amos, Casey, and Jake had to drag to and from school got thicker and itchier as each day got a little colder, slid a little further down the last stretch of the annual bell curve that peaked at around 92° F in July and terminated on both ends in winter.

The matriarch of the Walters family kept track of this progress, dutifully turning days into strings of numbers and watching those strands collect into a type of history. For over two weeks, Emma had been able to record the city newspaper's forecast and her own daily outdoor thermometer readings in her leather journal with a satisfied nod each morning. The tables and charts she made were dependable, regular, and predictable. November was acting as November should, unlike so many other things in Whimsy and the world beyond. Then the sixteenth day of the month barged into Emma's life heavy, sticky, and seventeen degrees hotter than its predecessor, and it drove her straight out of town.

She'd risen before the sun to prepare for Jake's party that night, but by 11:00 AM she'd found herself with nothing left to do but think about the humidity. How it made her thick wool pullover tight and weighty on her skin. How it commingled with the warmth of the oven and the steam of the dishwasher to make her kitchen unbearable. How her

cheeks and forehead pinked when she walked too briskly or carried too many dishes at once. How neither Brock nor her children offered to help her, overheated and frazzled as she was. So at 11:15, she was sitting in the front seat of her minivan, pushing her hair back from her damp temples and leaning in over the air vents.

Then she was on the bridge out of Whimsy. The city blurred past as she stared straight ahead. Her hands gripped the steering wheel, and her mouth hung open a finger's width or so. After a while, civilization dropped away, replaced by a cracked, crooked road, the occasional boarded-up Pure gas station, and a dense border of trees that blocked Emma's view on her right and left. The only horizons available to her gaze were the ones in front of her and behind her. She inhaled deliberately and kept driving, trying to keep her mind numb to everything but her need to breathe freely, to escape the sensation of suffocation.

"Run, run, running away," an internal voice chided. It didn't sound like her own. No, this was Maw Maw squawking in her head. "Wonder where you got that from? It wasn't me. I can tell you that much. You have that Pratt cowardice, just like your deadbeat daddy."

"Zipper up, you miserable old crow," Emma spit back. "You're supposed to be enjoying your eternal reward, sizzling to a crisp in hell, so you best get to leaving me alone."

"Then tear your flesh, spill your blood, and burn your bones, because that's where I live now. I'll always be with you."

With that, Maw Maw's voice slithered away, leaving Emma to drive in silence for several more minutes. She still didn't know where she was going and was just beginning

to consider turning around when the road beneath her curved to the left. It took her around a clump of trees, which in turn revealed a previously concealed cabin, a building she must have passed a hundred times before without noticing. It's Carolina blue exterior walls clearly hadn't been touched up in a long time, and deep cracks ran down some of the wooden posts that held up the small carport protruding from one side. The structure could easily have been mistaken for a recently abandoned home, if it hadn't been for the white poster board taped above the open door and the long plastic tables standing in the patch of ankle-high, yellow grass out front. In squashed, black, handwritten letters, the flimsy sign read, "GRAND OPENING: MARV'S MEMENTO MART AND HEIRLOOM EMPORIUM." Sure enough, the tables were covered in what appeared to be the contents of several attics. Emma stamped on her brake pedal and swerved onto the dirt drive.

The minivan wrenched to a stop at the end of a line of unevenly spaced cars parked at a slant. Ahead of the van sat a badly dented Mini Cooper, a Ford Pinto with a splotchy brown and white paint job that matched the name, a sagging Oldsmobile, and a pickup truck the color of a bitter orange. The former occupants of two or three of these vehicles stood among the rows of tables, groping rusted wind chimes and stuffed animals with mismatched ears. Emma watched them sort through the discarded pieces of other people's lives in her rearview mirror before she took her key from the ignition and stepped out of her car.

"Well, hello there, stranger!" hollered a man in a green and red checkered shirt, royal blue corduroy pants, and orange suspenders. He'd been perched on a tree stump to one side of the tables before he'd hoisted himself up and begun tramping over toward

Emma. “Or should I say, ‘new friend’? Welcome to Marv’s Memento Mart and Heirloom Emporium, Colon, A Stuff Store! I’m Marv, and I am simply bent on -- simply dead-set on, simply raring to -- help you find the secondhand souvenir of your dreams!”

Emma swung the driver’s side door of her minivan shut, stepped over a mossy puddle to shake Marv’s hand, and said, “Then you’re just the man I need, aren’t you?”

“Tickled to make your acquaintance,” he replied with an exaggerated bow. “May I show you to my front yard display? We’ve got some great details today, I’ll tell you.”

Guiding her with his hand on the small of her back, Marv led Emma over to the nearest table, where he picked up a wooden tea box, showed Emma its front and back, and then gingerly lifted its lid in the same drawn-out way a game show host might reveal a contestant’s prize. In each square slot within, somebody had placed a rolled up necktie.

“Nice, huh?” he said, his bright eyes focused on Emma’s face. “Now, back at my old location, I used to keep ladies jewelry in this here box. Called it the neck-*lace* case, with a long *A* in *lace*, so it would rhyme. But then I started coming in to so many fine ties, and after a while, I decided to put the best and most beautiful of them in this pretty little box, so I could show ‘em off to nice, discerning customers like yourself. I can tell by your ring that you’ve got yourself a husband, ma’am. Must be a lucky man. A good man, or you wouldn’t have married him! So you can’t tell me he don’t deserve a great tie or two. And, what do you know, these come with the Marv Money-Back Guarantee! Let’s take a look, shall we?”

Marv began pointing to his favorites, starting with a cheese-themed one and one that looked like a failed expressionist’s attempt to illustrate the restorative effects of hydration and a full night’s sleep. Emma thought it best to nod and pretend to admire his

taste. Fortunately, he was soon called away by a greasy-haired woman holding a pair of leather sandals and inquiring about the shoes' previous adventures. This left Emma free to commence her own search.

She slowly picked through the contents of one table and then another. Along the way, a blue and white vase and a painting of Chinese dragon each earned an extra moment of her attention, and she lingered in front of an ornate iron bird cage, opening and closing its miniature door with the tip of her pinky finger. She reached the end of second row of tables without having found anything special, any small treasure she wanted to paste into her mythic past with a pretty lie. She returned to an embroidered footstool dejected and tried to give it another chance. It depicted light pink cottage roses blooming over a carmine backdrop, but its design was slightly off-center. She supposed she could tell Casey and the rest of her family that her own great-grandmother, Maw Maw's mom, had stitched it by hand and given it to her daughter before her wedding.

"Now, full disclosure," Marv told the stringy-haired customer, who was standing at a table to Emma's left and holding up a sterling silver oval locket. "That necklace there has a story to it, and it ain't a pretty one."

"Is it something that would give the piece bad juju?" the woman asked Marv gravely.

"Only if you consider the grisly murder of two children by their own lunatic mother to be bad juju-worthy."

Emma abandoned any pretense of studying the footstool and openly watched the pair at the other table now. She was fairly certain she recognized the tale. Any long-term Whimsonian would.

“Filicide?” the other customer whispered. She kept her mouth nearly closed, even as she spoke, barely letting the word out into the air.

“Yes, ma’am,” Marv answered. “Reportedly happened in a little town about forty-five minutes east of here. There was this woman, see? Real delicate, high-society heiress type. Her mother had come from lots of money and then married a man who ended up getting busted for bootlegging during prohibition so that he could stretch out the allowance his hoity-toity in-laws gave him. Real weird childhood, is what I’m saying. Raised in a strange household. Anyway, this woman grows up, gets hitched, has two little babies, and everything’s going along fine. Then one night, she just it loses it – her mind, her marbles, whatever. She picks up some huge knife and slices her son’s throat, then her daughter’s. One of her fancy relatives came by her beautiful house the next day and found the kids cold in their beds and the woman hanging from a rafter.”

“That’s--- that’s horrible,” the other customer said. “Evil!”

“But where does the locket come in?” Emma asked. She walked over to their table and examined the piece more closely. A crowded leaf design had been embossed on the front, and the back bore an engraving in a language Emma couldn’t identify. It said, “Semper tecum conero.”

“Well, whoever dealt with her stuff found this necklace wrapped up with her daughter’s name on it. It’d been her mother’s before she had it, and her grandmother’s before that, and it seems she was about to pass it on to the next generation before she went cuckoo for killing.”

Marv had related all this with great enthusiasm, as if he were telling a ghost story in front of a campfire. The greasy-haired customer was shaking her head, though, and

began to shuffle away, farther down the table and presumably on to items with better juju. Emma remained behind, holding the locket.

“I want to buy this,” she said.

Marv laughed. “But I haven’t even told you what it costs. Could be a million bucks.”

“I don’t care,” Emma replied. “The locket, please.”

Half an hour later, Emma was wading through traffic in the city, working her way back to Whimsy with her new purchase in a cardboard jewelry box inside a Walmart bag Marv had given her. Her phone rang, and she plunged her right hand into the purse on the passenger’s seat of the minivan, groping its contents without ever looking away from the rear of the bright blue Honda Civic in front of her. The urge to ram the thing hard enough to knock its Ole Miss license plate off nearly overwhelmed her.

Now that she was almost back into town, the temperature was starting to make her irritable again. It wasn’t objectively hot, but Emma didn’t measure anything by what it actually was or was not. She measured things by what they were supposed to be, and since a mid-November day was supposed to be nearly twenty degrees cooler, the weather in Whimsy was far too hot. It made her sweat, and the fact that she’d dressed for a typical late autumn day that morning didn’t help.

As soon as Emma’s fingers finally reached the bright orange phone at the bottom of her purse, she yanked it out, answering the incoming call on the final ring.

“Hello, Brock. I’m driving. Do you need something?” she asked, tightening her left-handed grip on the steering wheel.

“Where have you been? You left me and the kids with nothing to eat and no idea when you were coming home,” Brock groaned on the other end of the line. While he continued complaining, Emma switched lanes, hoping to pass the Civic before they reached the bridge to Whimsy.

“Hmmmmmmm,” she said after a moment, pretending she’d been listening. Emma could see the bridge in the distance, could see where both lanes merged into a single bottleneck before the concrete structure. She tried to inch ahead of the Civic, which was still to her right and slightly in front of her. She didn’t trust whichever preoccupied, inexperienced coed was driving the blue eyesore, and there was no way she was going to let herself get stuck behind it on the bridge, hanging above the lake on a county-built platform, where anything could go wrong and result in her falling to a dark, wet death.

“Hmmmmmmm?” Brock repeated. “Are you even listening to me?”

“Of course I am. And I’ll have you know that I was out at Maw Maw’s storage pod, picking up a locket for Casey’s project,” Emma said, as she pulled ahead of the Civic. When she got to the foot of the bridge, she threw on her turn signal and ground her foot into the gas pedal, speeding past and around the blue car. She didn’t get more than a few dozen yards, though, before she had to smash her brakes instead. The van stopped just inches from the suddenly still car in front of her.

Five or six vehicles ahead, there was a three-vehicle pile-up – and a nasty one at that. The middle vehicle, a late ‘90s sedan, had been compacted in the front and back, crunching together at sickening angles like a discarded soda can. Drivers from other cars were already swarming out, surrounding the crash and shouting things that Emma, with

her windows rolled up and the blood already pounding in her ears, couldn't discern. The sun seemed to brighten in an instant, and her vision blurred. With every car before and behind her stopped, blocked by the unexpected steel and flesh tragedy unfolding ahead, she was stuck. Stuck on a bridge. Stuck above water. Stuck in front of that awful blue Honda Civic, like an animal trapped in the woods, a metal cage on one side and the barrel of a hunter's gun on the other.

"Emma? Emma, are you still there?" Brock asked through the phone that had fallen into her lap. She picked it up with shaking hands, grasping it too tightly between her clammy thumb and index finger and pulling the speaker to her lips.

"I... I have to go." Her voice was high and tight, congesting with something that was starting to feel a whole lot like panic. "I have to go."

Without another word, Emma snapped her phone shut. Just as quickly as she'd cut off one call, however, she made another one, this time dialing 9-1-1.

An operator – a woman in her late twenties, by the sound of it – answered within seconds and asked about the nature of Emma's emergency.

"There's been an accident," Emma replied, loud and breathless. "A car accident. On the bridge. I am stuck on the bridge behind a car crash. On the bridge. Actually over the water."

"Are you referring to the pileup on the bridge into Whimsy, ma'am?" the operator inquired. Her words, unlike Emma's, were crisp, her tone businesslike and soft in a way that was supposed to be soothing, sympathetic, efficient.

"Yes. The bridge to Whimsy. There's three cars blocking traffic on both sides. It's really bad."

“Yes, ma’am. We’ve already had several calls about that accident, and we have help on the way. Hopefully, we’ll be able to get any injured parties out of there shortly.”

“Alright, that’s fine. But I’m going to need a helicopter.”

“*What*, ma’am?”

Before Emma could reply, her phone beeped in her ear, alerting her to another incoming call. She opted to ignore it, not even pausing to check the caller-ID before turning her attention back to the call at hand.

“A helicopter. I need a helicopter to come get me. And a tow truck for my van. I cannot stay on this bridge. I cannot be stuck here, hanging above this giant lake on this crumbly old thing, so you need to send a freaking helicopter to come get me NOW. Do you understand?”

The operator was silent for a moment, while the heat in Emma’s veins began to make her blood bubble, boil into fidgety anger. She waited for a reply, glaring at her staring wheel and practically panting into the phone.

“I can’t send a helicopter out just to get you off the bridge faster, ma’am. I’m afraid that’s just not possible,” the operator said finally.

“Don’t tell me that. Do not tell me that,” Emma shouted, the power fully back in her voice now. “If you can’t get me a helicopter and get me off this bridge, I’ll go to your supervisor. Put him on.”

“My supervisor’s a woman, ma’am, and she won’t be able get you a helicopter either. Now, unless you have anything else to report about the accident or some other emergency, I’m going to need you to hang up so we can get this line free.”

“Like hell I’m going to hang up! I *do* have an emergency, and I need you to help me. That is what you do, right? Help people? So help me, right now, or I will sue you people for so much you won’t even be able to afford a toy phone to take your precious other calls on!”

Somewhere near the end of Emma’s speech, she heard a click, and the line went dead, although it wasn’t her who hung up this time. She sat, fuming, staring at her phone, and grinding her teeth for several minutes before she could even start to consider her other options. It occurred to her that she might get out, abandon her car, and walk back towards the city, but she wasn’t willing to leave her shiny silver Odyssey to get stolen or broken into or tumble into the lake below in her absence. Instead she resigned herself to waiting and, hoping to distract herself, checked her phone for the call she’d missed. The number’s area code was one she didn’t recognize, but she knew immediately that the phone call had been from her dad. His were the only unfamiliar numbers Emma ever saw on her screen. For years, ever since Maw Maw died, her father had been calling her from a new number, a new state supposedly abounding with promising new job opportunities every couple months. He may have even started his ritualistic dialing before Maw Maw’s death, as soon as he’d been released from prison perhaps. If he had, though, Emma was never told.

Now, as Emma watched medics arrive and worm their ways through the cloud of people surrounding the damaged cars and injured drivers, she almost forgot she was on a bridge, that there was no helicopter coming, that she should be scared of the water below. Closing her eyes to shut out the chaos around her, she hit the green button on her phone,

dialing her voicemail. And then she heard that deep voice, the voice that sounded like it'd been sanded with a mouthful of grit and rock. Her daddy's voice.

“Hey, bumblebee,” the recording said. “I just got your email about Thanksgiving dinner and Jake's party... I'm sorry, honey, but I don't think I can make it to either this year. I have a lot going on back here in Wyoming. Just got a great new job. I'm the new guy, have to put in a lot of hours – you understand, don't you? Anyway, I'm still going to try to come out for Christmas, but...”

He paused here, and Emma squeezed her eyes shut more tightly still.

“But, no promises, alright?”

Chapter Twelve

Heather

Heather knocked on the Walters family's door slightly after 6:40 PM on Saturday evening. Seconds later, Emma's oldest child, Casey, and middle child, thirteen year old Amos, answered. The kids wore what seemed to be their Sunday best – a green satin A-line dress and a dented silver locket for the former and a brown pantsuit for the latter – and were quickly joined in the doorway by their father, Brock, who muttered a greeting in Heather's direction while he tugged at the knot in his tie. Emma had dressed them, and none of them were happy about it. That much was obvious.

“Hello, Brock,” Heather said as she stepped over the threshold and past Casey and Amos, both of whom were already slouching back into their shadowing corners. “You look... nice.”

Brock in fact did not look nice, as Brock never looked particularly nice. He was a large man, not in height but certainly in width, whose dark blonde crew cut and weak chin (which had long ago disappeared into his fleshy neck) made his head look disproportionately diminutive compared to his doorway-filling shoulders, pot belly, labor-hardened hands, and stocky legs. He'd been a good ole boy back in the day – a muscular, tan, four-wheeler ridin', deer huntin', tobacco chewin', skinny-dippin' in the creek country boy – and his aging, blotchy brown skin showed it.

Heather had disliked him from the first time they met. The existence of a man who lived so completely in the physical world, who was so inarticulate and so often

snubbed her with his inattentiveness, offended her. To make matters worse, she never knew when Brock had told a joke until he began chuckling stiffly and had, on multiple occasions, been disgusted by the sight of a thread of white saliva tethering the upper and bottom rows of his yellowing teeth to each other.

Behind Brock, women's voices effused into the beige foyer from some other part of the house, but the only thing Heather could pick out was Emma's braying laugh. Then the sound ceased as abruptly as it had begun, as it usually did when Emma would rather be screaming than laughing. Heather tilted her head to one side and asked, "So where is everybody? Do you have all Jake's friends and their parents locked up in the dungeon?"

Brock grunted and jerked his head unhelpfully toward the doorway that led to the hall that led to the rest of the house. "They're all that way. Last I checked, the moms were in the kitchen, and the dads were on out the deck. Emma don't know it, but one of them brought a flask, and they're passing it around. And, of course, the children are all in the den, having a blast as they sit quietly and try not to get crumbs from the mini quiches on their fancy clothes."

Heather caught her breath in surprise and, unexpectedly, a little pride. That was the most she'd heard Brock say at one time since the last presidential election, and he'd even worked in some subtle sarcasm aimed at his wife's idea of a children's party. Perhaps there was some hope for him yet.

"Thank you, Brock. It's been a pleasure, as always."

Heather hurried out of the room and down the hall before any more sentiment could rise up in her on behalf of this rude, simple brute of a man. There was something wrong, so very wrong, with her these past two weeks. She *liked* being cool and detached.

She *enjoyed* looking down on others, with their messy sympathies and their inner turmoil and their moral struggles, from her lofty perch of self-interest and charm. It allowed her to be decisive and independent, and she could preoccupy herself with any mischievous pleasure she wished because she wasn't moored down by a tragically tender heart. She would make no apology for wanting to protect her own happiness.

But first she literally ran and hid from Shelley, then she left Agèd Pages without talking to Virginia about keeping whatever she may have seen at Heather's house to herself, and now she wanted to pat Brock on the head for stringing some sentences together like a normal human? By all appearances, she was going soft, a prospect that was troubling enough to make her shake her head in a fruitless attempt to clear her mind and quicken her pace. In almost no time at all (which was still far too much time for her taste), she found way to the dining room door, where she paused to straighten her shoulders, summon an industrial-strength smile, and fall into character before facing the vultures waiting on the other side.

Everyone heard the door swinging open and turned to watch her stride in. Heather Hartman was making another memorable entrance, ladies and gentlemen. It was, after all, an art she had perfected long ago.

A glance around the room revealed close to twenty women crowded into Emma's copper brown and tangerine orange kitchen and the adjoining dining room, although they did not all stand together. Instead of forming one large group, they had split into cells of three to five women, some of whom were tiredly swapping stories about their overly energetic children, some exclaiming over each of the hor d'oeuvres covering Emma's usually immaculate counters, several discussing the inconvenience of daylight saving

time changes, and a few in a corner consoling a woman who was loudly bemoaning the state of her sex life. At the center of it all, nodding cheerfully but visibly flushing with something less pleasant, stood Emma. The cluster around her consisted of three women Heather identified as Beth, who was biting her lower lip and didn't seem to know what to do with her hands; Catherine, who Heather could have sworn Emma wasn't going to invite; and Virginia, who was reaching up to wrap a flabby arm around Catherine's narrow shoulders.

“Heather! I'm so glad you could make it!” Emma cried as the fashionably tardy newcomer drew near and closed the partial circle of WLBS members. Virginia and Beth echoed her sentiment, Virginia more loudly than Beth, while Catherine nodded a greeting of her own. Heather returned the favor, but could feel the down-like hairs on the back of her neck bristle at the latter's presence. Although Beth wouldn't be considered short, as Virginia and Emma would, Catherine was the only one in the group at least as tall as Heather, and any time the pair made eye contact, her gaze – a direct one, not raised like most – left a bitter, coppery taste in Heather's mouth. Interacting with Catherine was to Heather a lot like sucking on a penny. A dirty, lemon-juice-coated penny. It was one of the things that had originally bonded her and Emma.

Once the initial courtesies were taken care of, Virginia returned her hand to Catherine's upper back, demonstrating a type of warm familiarity and pride foreign to Heather. Then she explained, “We were just in the middle of congratulating Catherine here on her good news when you walked in. I had to all but drag it out of her, but guess what! Our own Miss Catherine Fletcher is up for a creative writing job at the high school!”

“Oh,” Heather said blandly right before Emma, who had somehow fidgeted her way around Beth and to her side, kicked her ankle with the sharp, bony side of her own, surprisingly solid, foot.

“Oh!” she repeated, this time with genuine interest, although it wasn’t about Catherine’s little job opportunity. She glanced up and over, only to be further startled by the expression on Emma’s reddened face. Her dumpy middle-aged cohort appeared to be trying to burrow holes into her skull with indignantly widened eyes. Heather began to mouth *What?* to her, but then she realized.

Emma considered the Whimsy schools her personal realm to run as she saw fit. She had campaigned for or against every administrative issue since Casey entered preschool and, in fact, long ago worked her way into each committee, board, and parents’ group in the district so that she could oversee every detail pertaining to her children’s education. Town rumor even had it that the principle of the high school kept a running list of Emma’s concerns, all the dangers she imagined would threaten her vision for the schools and disrupt the *status quo* she’d worked so hard to build; supposedly, he called the list “The Dilemmas, emphasis on *Emma*” and updated it twice a week. But now Catherine, whom Emma cared for about as much as Heather did, seemed to have her own plans. She was becoming an agitator in Emma’s queendom, and Emma, no doubt, was taking serious issue with it.

“And get this,” Virginia continued enthusiastically, insensible as always to the politics of their little book society and apparently unaware of the dark understanding that had just passed between two of its members. “This afternoon, this very afternoon, she got the call about scheduling an interview with the school board – which I’m sure is just a

formality, even if Emma can't tell us so per se. I mean, who could be a better choice for the job than Catherine?"

"Who indeed?" Emma muttered, too quietly for anyone but Heather to hear. Catherine, meanwhile, blushed happily and lifted her shoulders into a modest shrug, but didn't say anything herself. Unlike Beth, who always seemed tense with words she wanted but didn't know how to release, Catherine seldom appeared interested in sharing her thoughts, content instead to keep the mysterious turnings of her mental cogs private until etiquette or her discomfort with spontaneity and disorganization compelled her to speak. Heather wasn't sure which way irritated her more.

"You're giving me far too much credit, Virginia. There are probably plenty of other well-qualified candidates the committee will interview. But thank you anyway," Catherine said after several seconds of silence made it obvious that the others were waiting for her to respond. When they did come, her words sounded crisp and formal but nevertheless prompted Virginia to envelop her in a tight, full-body hug.

Unsurprisingly, the stick-like woman wearing a bargain business suit squirmed in an awkward, angular way, trying to free her arms from the other woman's grip, for several moments before finally surrendering to the affectionate onslaught. Then she patted the middle of Virginia's back with a single, flat hand until she was released.

"Oh! Oh!" Virginia exclaimed as she pulled away from Catherine and swiped what looked to be a tear of joy from the inner corner of her right eye. "And on top of that, if you can believe it, Beth found the clues today. Now, I know I haven't found my own set, and I don't think Heather or Catherine have either, so that makes her very first – and

the only one of us, besides Emma, who knows the clues that will lead one lucky lady to the treasure.”

The clues. The treasure hunt. Heather suddenly remembered the WLBS’s little project as the blood drained from her face. It was yet another ball – yet another component of what was supposed to be her perfect, enviable, great-at-everything, Wonder Woman life – she’d dropped when she seemed to be on the verge of dropping. Children had already rolled out of her reach, her respectability was about to fall from her grasp as soon as everyone in town found out that she’d been dragged to the police station and accused of petty theft, and she had no idea where or even if her marriage (not to mention her job at her husband’s company) would land once she told Christopher she couldn’t have kids.

She still had Hardboiled Harry, of course, but she couldn’t exactly slip a “Had an Illicit Affair” page in her photo album between “Painted the Picket Fence White” and “Renovated the Kitchen” and then pass the thing around to show off her storybook life.

That meant this was it. The treasure hunt was the fourth ball, the last of the orbs she could name aloud and claim in public, and the only one that hadn’t yet bounced so far away, and she needed it. She thirsted for the win right now, more than she’d ever imagined she would, because she had to get as many balls as possible back in the air before the spotlight hit her and anyone else saw her as the failed performer she was. Before someone called her out on twenty-five years of lies and masks and play-pretend gone mad.

So she hatched a plan.

Chapter Thirteen

Beth

After Mrs. Garrison announced that Beth had found Emma's clues and after Heather ran off to another part of the house to take care of something, Beth excused herself from the group, intending to retrieve her phone from the guest room where all the women had left their purses and coats. She wanted to check for a voicemail from David, since she'd called him several times that day to announce her discover and remind him that she wouldn't be home for dinner. Instead, she walked in on Heather pulling a crinkled scrap of paper out of Beth's own blue, spiral-bound daybook. Light from the hallway filled the dim room quickly enough for Beth to notice that the three fingers of the hand that weren't holding the book up were wrapped around the strap of her lavender shoulder bag, with every pocket and flap hanging open. Then everything fell to the floor with a *thump, thump*, and the sigh of paper settling on the carpet last of all in an otherwise silent room.

For a moment, Beth stood in the hallway outside the room, blinking and trying to make sense of the scene before her. All relevant material – what Heather had said before she'd split from the other ladies, what else the bag had contained, whether or not kleptomania was a fashionable habit among Whimsy's most stylish women – seemed to melt away with each jerk of her eyelids, however, leaving behind only a cloud of adrenaline and a partially-remembered article she'd read in a waiting room once. The piece, which was suddenly rising back into Beth's consciousness after years of neglect,

had claimed that in the time it took someone to blink once, ten people died. If that was true, she mused absurdly now, she'd just killed enough people to qualify this silent stare-down between Heather and herself as a crime against humanity.

“Damn it, Beth!” Heather snapped hoarsely as her frozen face and body jumped back to life and pulled Beth’s thoughts away from genocide. “What are you doing in here?”

“I – I had to get a... Um, I had to get something from my purse.” Beth could hear herself stumbling while she spoke. Embarrassment and guilt clogged her throat against all reason.

“Oh, damn you, damn you! You ruin everything.” Heather cursed as she knelt to the ground and began scooping Beth’s scattered items into her well-toned arms with quick, crane-like lunges. The motion knocked her crest of ruby hair forward so that it hid most of her face from view, but Beth didn’t need to see an expression to know she hadn’t simply startled Heather. That didn’t warrant this much anger. No, this felt less like spotting a kindergarten classmate show her polka dot underwear to some first grade boys on the playground and more like overhearing the prom queen inform the drama teacher she was pregnant with his child. And somehow Beth’s things and Beth’s privacy were involved, which made her the victim or the wronged party somehow. The teacher’s wife, so to speak.

Yet something in her gut still clenched with cloudy blue sympathy at the layer of panic she could hear under Heather’s animosity. And, of course, there was her curiosity to address, as well. That was a sharper, yellow sensation, present in a smaller quantity than the sympathy, but sleek and piercing enough to be felt almost as much. So Beth

scuffled forward and eased the door shut behind her, casting Heather and herself into shadows. No matter what was about to come and who was in the wrong, she didn't want the entire party peering in on them. Certain moments, she figured, were best kept private.

“Shit,” Heather hissed as she pushed herself to her feet. Beth's purse, everything that had fallen out of it, her daybook, and the slip of paper were all piled haphazardly in her arms and wobbled as she rose. “You wouldn't believe me if I told you I'd accidentally knocked your purse over, would you? No, you couldn't buy that. You saw too much. I can see it in your face.”

Beth almost lifted a finger to her cheek to see if her face knew something she didn't, but she stopped herself by chewing the smooth, raw skin on the inside of her mouth, just below her bottom lip.

Heather's flawlessly plucked and penciled eyebrows jumped up and down her forehead into dramatic, almost balletesque points as she warmed up into her rant. She said, “You saw it. Don't try to deny it. You caught me digging through your bag, you saw which paper I had, and now you're going to rat me out to the rest, aren't you?”

In a sudden gust of clarity, Beth realized which of her notes and reminders Heather had pulled out of her daybook, and at that moment, she felt it. She felt her features move to mimic the shift in her thoughts without her conscious effort. She felt them respond to something in a way she'd never noticed before. She hadn't had to force them. She hadn't had to strain to mold them into a representation of her internal reactions for the sake of the people around her. It had been... easy.

“Is that what you're going to do?” Heather continued. “Go run and tell Mrs. Garrison and Emma and Catherine that mean old Heather was sneaking around where she

didn't belong and looking at other people's clues? That I'm a cheater? That would really just tickle you to no end, wouldn't it? Becoming the hero by rolling into town and taking me down, after all the years I've put into this inbred hellhole of a town and that ridiculous club. You'd love to take away everything I have left over stupid clues for a dinky little treasure hunt that I deluded myself into thinking mattered for an hour. That'd really get you going."

Heather finally stopped when she ran out of breath or words or the adrenaline that must have been fueling her sudden hatred for everything she'd seemed to love for as long as Beth had known her. Her shoulders drooped slightly, but her face remained hard, and, if anything, her lips pursed more forcefully. In the silence, the small part of Beth's brain that wasn't busy processing everything she was feeling for and about Heather wondered whether or not she made that same face herself when she and David fought.

"Um, ok," Beth said, trying not to bristle at the accusations and insults. She forced herself think of Heather as an injured animal, lashing out against anyone who dared approach, and summoned up as much sympathy as she could for someone who had just verbally assaulted her. They were friends, she reminded herself, new friends, and she was duty-bound to try to help.

"I think I know were you doing, and you probably expect me to be mad about it, but I'm not. You must have had your reasons, and you obviously have other stuff going on, so if you let me, I'll help you fix this. There has to be a way to amend everything, right? I'm sure we could figure something out."

"Fix it?" Heather asked, eyes narrowed. "Why should I believe you? You're idea of fixing it would probably be to go tell everyone what I did."

“No, no one else has to find out,” Beth said, still a little vague on how and why this was happening. All she knew was that Heather had gone through her bag looking for the clues she’d found that morning. But she refused to believe that Heather had betrayed her fellow WLBS members and cheated without good reason or strong motivation.

“No one? Really? Do you promise?” Heather asked. She was leaning forward now, almost smiling even, and reaching for Beth’s belongings, which she’d dumped on the bed beside her.

“Of course. On one condition.”

“Right. A condition. Naturally.” Heather sucked in her cheeks and refolded her arms across her chest, no doubt preparing to launch another tirade. “I guess there really is no such thing as a free lunch, is there? What is it? What do you want?”

“Nothing. Not really. It’s just that, well, if you put everything back in my bag like you found it, there’s no harm, no foul, right? You didn’t break anything or steal anything, so no one really *has* to know, as long as you don’t do it again. But you did read clues you didn’t find yourself, and that isn’t really fair to Mrs. Garrison or Catherine, let alone me.”

“Oh, so let me guess: You want me to stop looking for the prize on my own and help you win the hunt instead? Is that it?”

“No! No no no!” Beth exclaimed, flushing at the very thought. As if she’d blackmail someone into helping her cheat! The kind of guilt that would cause her would probably make her hair fall out. “That’s not what I mean. Just listen: I don’t think anyone should have an unfair advantage, but since the damage is already done, maybe you could at least level the playing field. Without having to tell anyone what you did, of course.

You and Emma are close. Couldn't you get her to give the whole group the clues herself, like we originally planned?"

"I think so, yeah. And then that would be it? I'd be in the clear and out of your debt?" Heather appeared to be growing taller and brighter before Beth's eyes, returning to her usual self with every word. Until that moment, Beth hadn't even realized how gray the other woman's skin had become or just how ill at ease the strange desperation hanging in the air had made her. She was more than ready to leave this room and this twisted version of Heather and this whole situation behind.

"Absolutely," she said.

"Then it's settled," replied Heather. "I'll put your stuff back right where I found it, so neat and tidy that you wouldn't even know I'd gotten into it, and then I'll speak to Emma. You just leave it all to me. Go tell the others about that wedding you're planning. And close the door on your way out."

It took at least two hours for Jake's party to end and for all the guests (besides the members of the WLBS) to trickle out the door, so by the time Emma waved goodbye to the last visitors, Mrs. Garrison, Catherine, Beth, and Heather were already gathered in her living room, waiting for her to reveal her clues. In truth, Beth had no idea how Heather had convinced her to change her plans in the middle of a party. But somehow her new partner in crime had done it, and she supposed that was all that mattered now. Even so, she felt uneasy, nauseous almost, about the situation and the secret she'd promised to keep, and she found that she couldn't sit still for long. She sprang to her feet several times while they were waiting, wandering into the kitchen or the bathroom as if in

search of something as of yet unidentified. Each time, however, she returned empty-handed and lowered herself back onto the floor next to the brick fire place, trying to remember if she'd even had a reason for getting up in the first place.

After the fourth of fifth time Beth sat down, Emma finally reappeared, manila folder in hand. The rest of the women cheered once and then fell quiet, hardly breathing, as Mrs. Garrison and Heather huddled together on the couch, wide-eyed and expectant. Heather, for one, was proving herself to be quite the convincing actress. Somehow, though, despite all logic, her skill made Beth feel better. She simply had to watch Heather and let herself buy into the performance, and it could all become real. Their exhilaration could become real. Their camaraderie could become fact. The five of them could be sisters through the WLBS, this treasure hunt could be the innocent fun in was meant to be, and all she had to do was pretend. So she did.

“Ladies and other ladies,” Emma began after a moment of intentional, quivering silence. She seemed to be getting caught up in the thrill of it all, despite herself. “I have here before me the inaugural clues for our first ever Whimsy Ladies Book Society Treasure Hunt!”

Again, the others whooped. Even Catherine smiled as broadly as her narrow lips allowed and seemed genuinely excited about this turn of events. Of course, the nearly empty gin and tonic in her right hand might have had something to do with that.

“Alright! Now, I have two of them for you, but you’re going to have to listen closely, you hear? Are y’all ready?”

Mrs. Garrison and Heather nodded, as Beth wrestled her daybook out of her purse. The spiral binding caught on a zipper and bent out of shape, but she tugged it free

and hastily flipped to the scrap of paper Heather had tucked back in, as promised. She wanted to read the clues – her clues – as Emma said them aloud. Catherine likewise pulled a black and white composition book from the leather attaché case at her side.

“Okay, here we go!” Emma said. “Your first clue for the treasure hunt that’s about to change everything you know and love is, ‘Go to the place where there’s only one book to find one somewhere you’d normally look.’”

The host of the impromptu meeting paused here and glanced up from her paper, giving Catherine just enough time to finish scribbling the words into her notebook. Beth watched her friend writing the last bit of the clue, strangely fascinated by the way she worked her scrunched mouth side to side in tandem with her pen.

“I’m not done yet!” Emma reminded everyone. “Second clue: ‘If you find a man there named Special Selves Wilt, steal his Letters without any guilt.’”

For a moment, nobody said anything, and the only sound in the room was the scratching of Catherine’s pen. Then Heather exhaled loudly and asked, “Ok, but really, Emma. What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That’s what we’re supposed to figure out, isn’t it?” Catherine snapped before anyone else could reply. She was frowning more severely than usual now, as if to atone for her recent smile.

Beth, amused by the sour way Heather sucked in her cheeks at this response, ducked her head to hide the laugh she was trying to choke back. Catherine’s outburst probably would have shocked her if she hadn’t witnessed a few of these sudden switches before.

Recently, though, she’d been coming to suspect that Catherine wasn’t deliberately aloof or judgmental, but simply had her own trouble bridging her interior and exterior worlds.

She seemed like she wasn't quite able to understand how other people worked, and Beth couldn't help but love her for that. It was just one of those idiosyncrasies she was learning to recognize and appreciate in the ladies around her – one of those little quirks that, for the first time since she'd moved to Whimsy so many months before, were making her feel like a real member of the WLBS.

Without having to force a thing, Beth grinned and looked back up at her friends.

Chapter Fourteen

Emma

After Emma's near-death experience on the bridge, the disheartening message from her father, and the overly probing questions Casey had asked after Emma gave her "Maw Maw's locket" before Jake's party, Emma resolved to put the whole matter behind her for as long as she could. Her mind was made up: There would be no more monthly trips, no more impromptu drives, no more scavenges, no more lies, no more bitterness, and no more disappointment. And that meant there could be no more Maw Maw and even no more of her father. Nothing of her old life or the people who had forced her out of it.

To that end, Emma devoted the following three days to baking, scrubbing, and scolding. She bleached and vacuumed every trace of a recent social gathering from her home. She taught herself and then Casey and Amos how to make raisin-filled apple dumplings. She resisted the urge to claim the dumplings came from an old family recipe. She shuttled her children between school and Holiday Pageant practices, and she petitioned to force the local YMCA to instate stricter dress code regulations with a matriarchal fervor unprecedented even by her. And she almost went crazy as a result. She loved her family – anyone in Whimsy could confirm that – but it turned out she couldn't stand her husband and kids when they were all that occupied her mind. When she had to spend so much time, so very much time, with them.

The problem was one of Emma's own making, of course. She knew that. She'd known it all along. After all, she was the one who had compounded the monotony of her

days by deciding to avoid all four of the other members of the WLBS. She'd hoped that the voluntary isolation would prevent attempts to coerce the location of her book out of her. Such a thing was fathomable, now that the game had taken on a deliciously competitive sheen. She had seen the predator in Heather's black-rimmed feline eyes when they met after Jake's party and could imagine similar beasts growing inside the rest of the ladies now that progress was finally being made. She'd even encouraged it as she saw the other members off at the end of the night by offering subtle comment here, a veiled slight there, and some good, old-fashioned praise, doled out from commander to soldier, from shepherd to sheep, sparingly and at random – just enough to make it valuable and foster contention. But then, alas, she'd had to distance herself from the hunt in the subsequent days. The gamemaster couldn't simply sit next to the players, holding the very cards they sought, for long without inciting some sort of uprising or betrayal. Somebody had to keep these girls honest, and Emma, who seemed the only woman for the job, had dutifully accepted the role.

Nevertheless, human will can only be so strong, and Emma's fractured on Tuesday night, after she discovered that Casey had allowed a tub of orange sherbet to melt on the counter while she blathered to some boy on the phone. She forgave her daughter with the most lackluster of warnings and then lay awake half the night, berating herself for having become such a negligent, indulgent mother. It was then, delirious from lack of sleep, that she finally admitted that she could no longer stand the tedium of ties, carpool, cleaning, child-rearing, dinner, ties, carpool, cleaning, child-rearing, dinner, ties, carpool, cleaning, child-rearing, dinner, and nothing else. Desperate for a break from the

domestic life she loved so loudly and publically, she decided to reverse her avoidance policy and invited her fellow WLBS members out to lunch the next morning.

Heather, naturally, already had plans – no doubt immoral, unchristian ones that would make Emma blush and howl with naughty delight when the former described them the next time they met – and Beth claimed she couldn't spare any time for a midday break, as she and Dr. Anderson were dealing with a Dalmatian in critical condition. Emma imagined the creature was losing its spots or some such thing.

That just left Virginia and Catherine, who both agreed to meet Emma at the Firefly Café at noon sharp, despite the stigma that persuaded certain residents to avoid the Firefly on Thursdays. The Butterfly Café had met its fiery destruction on a Thursday, and the day had never quite emerged from the shadow cast by the vague air of superstition that typically plagued Whimsy's older, more simple-minded residents. Emma, who had long ago condemned Virginia to that class for her crime of being nearly twenty years older than any other member of the WLBS, couldn't help but indulge in surprise and disappointment when she passed the test she'd been meant to fail. Emma hadn't even wanted to eat at the Firefly. She'd just wanted to be a martyr.

Between this and her recent overexposure to her family, she was already predisposed to discontent when she arrived at a quarter after noon and saw that construction on the new building next door had been going well. The roof was finished, the windows had been installed, one of the side walls was nearly complete. To make matters worse, Emma found Virginia sitting alone at a small table in the far corner of the packed café's current, metal structure. Apparently, everyone in town had suddenly forgotten the great Thursday curse of the Butterfly and flocked to the restaurant, so

Emma was forced to shove past a twenty-something waitress with a full serving tray (and, by the looks of her hair, an art degree) and march through the crowd of older couples and mothers with young children before sinking into the chair next to Virginia. Once there, she adopted her most world-weary expression with ease.

“Thank heavens you could meet me,” she groaned. “Brock and the kids have been driving me insane the past couple days. You know how it is—they don’t appreciate anything, they don’t say thank you. No one does what they say they will. You should consider it a blessing that you and Steven chose not to reproduce.”

She continued on without invitation, rattling off a full list of her complaints and recounting two miscommunications that had ruined one of her days. Once she had finally exhausted the topic, she inquired about Catherine’s absence.

Virginia, who had been offering sympathetic murmurs without stirring, started and replied, “Oh. She called me just a minute or two before you came in and said there was some sort of violent, literature-related incident at the high school. I think a young man in one of her classes got overheated while reading Byron and attacked another kid with a hole puncher? I’m not sure. I got kinda lost while she was explaining it all, but she should be here soon.”

Satisfied with that answer, Emma nodded and glanced around the café, trying to get Art Major’s attention. When she spotted the waitress clearing a table on the opposite side of the room, preparing it for somebody who wasn’t even seated yet, she scoffed and turned back to her companion.

“Well, anyway, I haven’t seen you since... what, Saturday night? How have you been? Have you figured out either of the clues yet?”

“Actually, I do have a theory,” Virginia said, looking sideways at Emma. “You don’t have to say anything, but it’s about your first clue, the one that goes, ‘Go to place where there’s only one book to find one somewhere you’d normally look.’ I have to admit, I was beyond baffled by that at first. But then I had a dream! I dreamt that I was at Pages, and that awful old coot, Mr. Evans, was giving his weekly rant. But instead of just watching him deliver his speech and hobble back out the door, I called out to him as he was turning to leave. I asked him why, despite all his trips to the store I’d put my very soul into in order to make Whimsy a better-read town, he’d never made a single purchase. Well, that caused that wrinkled, age-splotched man to spin right back around and glower at me. And you know what he said then?”

“No idea,” Emma prompted.

“He told me, ‘God and I only need one book, *Mrs. Garrison.*’ That’s when I woke up, and right away, I scuttled out of bed, grabbed a pencil and a piece of paper, and wrote, ‘One book = Bible. Place = Church!!!’ All because of a dream. Now how do you like that?”

Emma tried to make her expression look professional, unreadable. “It’s a clever theory, but I don’t think I’m at liberty to confirm or deny. Do you have anything else to run by me?”

“No, not yet, unfortunately.” Virginia thankfully neglected to outline her recent state of overall existence, about which Emma had only inquired in the interest of being polite. Instead, the older woman paused, frowned, and leaned forward with a gravity that compelled Emma to shut her already-reopened mouth and pull her seat closer to her

friend's. As she wriggled over, her chair's metal feet scraped the ground with a noise suggestive of a blocky 1950s robot giving both. It made both humans cringe.

"But, Emma, listen," Virginia continued. "I was at Heather's house around lunchtime on Monday. Not this past one, but the one before it. Anyway, while I was there, I heard something I know for a fact I wasn't supposed to hear. I think Heather is cheating on Christopher."

"Gosh mother-fricking dang it, Heather!" Emma exclaimed, too agitated to notice or mind the shock it elicited from Virginia. Besides, the older woman might as well think whatever she wished. What would she be able to do about it, besides add this moment to the bank of minor indiscretions she could blab all over town?

"She promised she'd be careful. But, Virginia, oh goodness. Promise me, Ginny, – you have to swear on your life, on Tim's life – that you won't tell Beth. Especially while the treasure hunt's still going on. I just know the whole thing would be ruined if she found out. All my hard work, all those hours, down the drain."

"Beth?" Virginia asked. She looked more and more bewildered by the second, and Emma had to wrap her fingers around the edge of the table in front of her and squeeze with all the strength she could spare in order to keep herself from chastising the other woman for her slowness at such a crucial moment. For an instant, she almost wished she'd been born in the North, or any other place where seniority didn't automatically demand the pretense of respect, as it did in the southern states. Then she recovered her senses.

“Yes. Beth cannot find out about Heather and David, okay? You have to promise you won’t say anything or even hint at something. It’s absolutely vital you keep this to yourself. You understand?”

“Hold on a second. You’re saying Heather is sleeping with David? David *Holden?*” Between the disarray of frizzy blond curls framing her round eyes and mouth and her short arms dangling, heavy and lifeless, at her sides, Virginia now seemed near fainting. Emma, to her credit, recognized her mistake at once. However, even that wasn’t quick enough to wrestle the wrinkled, pallid secret back in the basement without the aid of a time machine, the direct intervention of God, or a homicide. And the WLBS’s official, three-page constitution unfortunately prohibited its members from murdering one another.

With these realizations, a sudden, unbidden sense of losing her balance, of falling, falling, falling, struck Emma. It lodged itself in her gut as she imagined herself tumbling through the seat of the chair beneath her, cracking the earth’s surface, and boring through layers upon layers of dirt and rock until, finally, she reached the cragged entrance to hell itself. How would she possibly explain such a comedy of errors to the king of the damned? Plus, with the type of luck she was experiencing today, he’d probably turn out to be a Yankee. She could already hear him dropping his *Rs* and clipping his vowels.

When, at last, she could keep herself from cringing at the idea of her halo melting in hellfire, Emma turned back to Virginia.

“You didn’t know who it was,” she said flatly.

“No! Of course not. I just figured it was a coworker or something.”

Over the rattle of smooth ice chips clinking against each other in the glass of ice tea nestled between her quivering hands, the secret's newest initiate recounted her recent visit with Heather, as well as the revealing exchange at the door, in a low voice. When she was done, she shook her head and said, "But David... That's even worse. We have to tell Beth. In fact, I'm fixin' to call her right now and request a meeting. I just need a couple seconds to... to steady myself and mourn."

"Don't you dare! Don't you even think about it for one instant!" Emma whispered back, her tone at least as sharp as it had been dull mere moments before. She let go of the table so she could clasp her reluctant coconspirator's hand, discovering in the process that the soft, pale flesh gave under the pressure of her grip much more readily than the wood had. She could see Virginia trying not to wince. It was obvious in the way her left cheek twitched and the wrinkled skin around her eyes and hairline went taut, but Emma did not relent.

"Look here and listen. Alright, Virginia? Neither of us, not you nor I, knows all the details and the extenuating circumstances surrounding the three people and the relationships involved. So, far as I can see, we have no business running our little mouths, or poking our little noses in places they don't belong just cause we heard something stinks over there."

"But David and Beth are getting married in a couple months! For all we know, the poor thing could be sitting at home all alone every night, planning their wedding, while he's out gallivanting around with Heather. That's not fair or right, no matter which way you cut it."

“I hate to break it to you, Ginny, but fair and right have very little to do with the real world. This is Whimsy we’re living in, not Heaven or some magical never-ever-land land beyond the stars.”

“Don’t you think she has a right to know if her fiancé is cheating on her? Or Christopher! Shouldn’t he know about his wife?” Virginia said. Emma squeezed a little bit harder in response.

“Maybe, maybe not,” she said. “All I can confirm is that it’s not our job to tell her. This whole matter is completely between the two – or three – of them and has nothing to do with us. I’d have thought you, of all people, would respect that; you’re old enough to know that most everybody has a thing or two they don’t want nosy gal pals messing with. Plus, I promised Heather – on my *own* marriage – that I wouldn’t say anything. So not a word, capiche?”

Although Virginia appeared less than convinced by the argument, she didn’t have time to respond before the Minimum-Salary Art Major Barbie appeared with Catherine at her side, red-faced and apologetic. The women ordered roast chicken sandwiches all around, Emma and Catherine glasses of ice tea, and Virginia a refill of her own, but Emma didn’t stop staring at Virginia over the plastic floral centerpiece until the latter finally sighed and nodded. It didn’t matter if she was happy about it or not, just that she agreed and that Catherine remained oblivious.

“Well, ladies,” Emma said brightly, “I want to propose a toast. Let’s raise our glasses to good friends, great books, and grand treasure hunts!”

For the most part, she even meant it. The day hadn’t been a total loss, despite the disaster Virginia had nearly brought upon the women of Whimsy. After all, she’d averted

that single-handedly and still had some secrets to spare. Closely guarded secrets of her own, that only she did or would ever know. Secrets such as the call she'd made that morning to Ian Fayard, the president of the Whimsy Board of Education, of which she constituted one-fifth. Although the members had intended their most recent meeting to be the last one until after the holidays, it'd taken her only minutes on the phone to persuade Ian that the students of Whimsy would all benefit from the board investing a special interest in the vacant creative writing post at the high school immediately. Then she'd offered to head the effort herself, of course.

The best part was that it'd been so easy, exactly as running her schools and her book club and her town should be.

Chapter Fifteen

Heather

By the time Thursday morning yawned to life, Heather had been dreading it for a week. Seven and a half days, to be precise – that was how long it had been since she'd said goodbye to Christopher outside the airport and that was how long she'd had to figure out what, *how*, to tell him about the results of her doctor's appointment. And she hadn't thought of a damned thing.

Heather had taken the morning off work so she could welcome her husband home as soon as he stepped out of the taxi cab he'd insisted on catching after his plane landed. At present, she was perched on the edge of the leather couch in her living room with the blinds drawn again, pushing instant oatmeal around her bowl with a spoon and waiting. She hated waiting. She had hated it when she was three and waiting for her mom to pour her another helping of Cheerios, had hated it when she was in junior high and waiting all night for Darryl Longston to return her phone call, and probably always would hate it. But she'd never loathed waiting as much as she did now.

She was beyond itching with anticipation, was residing somewhere in the realm of hand-numbing, throat-closing, cheek-warming, intestine-compacting panic, wondering if she had the strength to stand up and the time to pack a bag, book a flight to Cuba, and head for the airport herself. She recognized, of course, that she'd brought her current dilemma upon herself. She couldn't escape the fact that she had known full and well what she was doing when she'd gotten married.

Heather had never possessed any illusions about her relationship with Chris or the debts she owed him: The two had met when she was twenty-seven, and by the time he proposed, she'd been pushing thirty. At that point, she was experienced enough to recognize the difference between takes-your-breath-away, leaves-you-to-die-of-a-broken-heart, only-exists-in-the-movies love and the more attainable mixture of physical attraction and security Chris was offering her. So she'd done the savvy thing and settled for the second option, convincing herself that it was the best thing a modern girl could hope for. Chris had been on the fast track, after all, to becoming the vice-president (and then, with any luck, CEO) of the consulting firm in the city his father had helped found. He was tall and tan, built like a soccer player, and crazy about Heather from the start. What could be more perfect?

Truthfully, she had known even then that Chris loved her in a way that reached far beyond whatever affection and pity she could conjure up for him. But she'd always tried to ignore it, or at least to hide it from him. To that end, she'd accepted his proposal. In exchange for his devotion to her and his eagerness to fill the part of the perfect, sexy husband who would complete her perfect, enviable life, she'd given him her hand in marriage and agreed to a set of unspoken obligations that had, in the five years since then, come to define her relationship with him. She would keep up the charade, even once her physical need for him ran out, stand by his side in his endeavors, and pretend to grieve when he left town for conventions or missed dinner because of some medical emergency. But most importantly, she knew, she'd eventually have to give him a little baby – a brand new, factory-condition Hartman who'd be more whole than Heather ever was and could

give Chris back all the love she couldn't. But now she'd be unable to accomplish even that, it seemed. So she fidgeted on the couch and waited.

Too soon and not soon enough, Heather heard a key turn in a lock and felt displaced air rushing across the room as the front door swung open. Then Chris was standing in the opening, bag in hand while the sunlight behind him streamed into the dim room and Heather's stinging, unblinking eyes. If she hadn't been so preoccupied, her aesthetic side might have taken a moment to appreciate the dramatic, almost biblical contrast between blond, shining, smiling Chris and his broken wife, tucked away in her desperation and her dark, self-made cell. As things stood, though, she simply closed her eyes and wished it all away.

It didn't work.

"Hey, Heather-Feather. I'm home," the man in her doorway announced. She answered with a word or two of greeting that she forgot as soon as they left her mouth and stood up to let herself be embraced.

Christopher noticed immediately that something was wrong, perhaps because Heather just watched without a word as he brought in his bags, shut the door, and went around the room turning on all the lights. When he finished pulling the blinds open, he sat down on the couch, patting the cushion beside him to bring Heather over. She obeyed numbly, if only so she wouldn't have to look directly at his face, at the skin around his temples and chin that had tightened with worry, and he asked her what had happened.

For once, she had no words, only a cyclone of smoky charcoal dread coiling in her stomach, pulsing as it grew denser and sharper, pushing its way up her throat, out of her belly button, and down through her legs. It would fill the entirety of her body, she

felt, and then the room, the town, the universe, if she did nothing, but still she sat transfixed. For a moment, it seemed as if she would never again know anything but that brackish churning. It was feeding on the concern clouding Christopher's face, pulling strength from Heather's own toxic, instantaneous recognition of the infinite ways in which she'd failed her husband and cheated herself. It paralyzed her with the reverberations of what must have been guilt or shame or doubt or regret. After so many years of numbing herself to such crippling emotions, she couldn't be sure, and so she sat helpless as whatever it was spinning round and round in that godawful twister tore through her being and destroyed the confidence, the persona, and the life she had spent years nursing into existence.

“Heather! Heather, talk to me. Tell me what's wrong,” Chris said. He'd clutched Heather's hand without her feeling it and was holding it with both of his own over his knees, rocking it back and forth as if he thought he could tease her turmoil out through her fingertips and take it into himself instead. Whereas under normal circumstances she would have been just a little more flattered than she was repulsed by such an earnest touch, Heather now found Christopher's grasp unbearable. She jerked her hand back as she leapt up from the couch and fled down the hall to the bedroom they shared. She knew without looking back that he was following her, could hear him stumbling along behind her in his favorite black loafers, but when she flung herself into the spacious room and collapsed at her mahogany vanity table, he hung back in the doorway, seeming to sense that she needed space.

She kept her eyes down and her face turned away from the mirror as she slid the top drawer of her vanity open and pushed away the paperweights, three smooth round

stones engraved with the words *beauty*, *ambition*, and *strength*. Finally, she yanked out the top sheet – the medical report that would tell Christopher everything she couldn't – and turned to face him. As she did, though, she caught sight of her reflection and paused involuntarily at the shock of it.

She hadn't yet wrestled her hair into any type of presentable style or even gotten dressed, so her thick waves still fell freely past her shoulders and breasts and tapered out near the bottom of her rib cage. Deep violet half-moons were blooming under her filmy eyes, and against the eggshell cotton of her oldest nightgown, her tangles took on the appearance of intertwining streams of copper – or rust. Even her pale, quivering hands seemed to betray her. The skin on the backs looked thin and semi-translucent like bible paper, and for some amount of time that could have been taken up by a few heartbeats or a few hundred breaths in and out, she let her gaze linger on the red blotches near her knuckles, the wispy strands of hair at the base of her wrist, and the calcium streaks that her chipped nail polish concealed only partially and considered how far she had fallen in a matter of days.

It was a tragedy on level with Greek myth, and she the butt of the joke, the moral of the story, the goddess turned monster.

When Heather finally wrenched her gaze away from her own image, she found Chris exactly where she'd expected – still hovering in the doorway, stuck between two rooms, two choices, two forces that Heather could not identify. She had never understood the appeal of the space inside a doorframe, the oppositions and indecision that tethered one there, or found another town where the residents spent as much time in them as the people of Whimsy did. Virginia, in particular, a true native Whimsonian, seemed to waste

half her life between rooms, like a pudgy, modern-day Janus (or *Jana*, as it were), but she was far from the only one. As far as anyone could tell, they all did it, every last man, woman, and child in the area.

For a time, Heather had attributed the town's peculiarity to the fact that Whimsy lay in the northern part of Mississippi, tornado country. It seemed plausible enough that the instinct to head for a doorway in times of trouble had simply persisted through the generations, hailing from a time before indoor bathtubs and basements were common, and people sought protection where they could. The people in the city and surrounding towns, she'd discovered, didn't appear to be afflicted with Whimsy's doorway disorder, though. Like her, they only stopped in one by accident, if a room were small and crowded or something blocked their path. In all her years in Whimsy, Heather had never felt the need to take up the habit, but Christopher had within months of moving into town, and right now, she couldn't stand that.

"Here," she said at last in a voice that didn't sound quite like her own. It was thin and reedy, with a certain ring of fragile concentration and a quiet tremor that reminded her of a yellow-striped plant bug she'd once seen clinging to a hydrangea leaf caught in the summer breeze. She'd been a child at the time, barely seven, but the memory of that bug's struggle against a wisp of wind on a lazy afternoon had stayed with her through all the years since.

Heather held out the report now, but refused to get up from the bench in front of her vanity table, forcing Chris to leave his little median and enter the bedroom to take it from her instead. When he did, she looked away, let him read it. The room was quiet

enough that she could hear him stop breathing when he reached the fatal conclusion and tense enough that she didn't realize she hadn't been breathing either.

“We...” Chris said with the last of his oxygen. He paused to inhale and clear his throat before turning the paper around in his hands so that it faced Heather. “So this means... we can't have a baby?”

Heather tried to nod, to stand up, to squeak out some reply, but couldn't. She collapsed instead, falling to her carpeted floor like a bird shot out of the sky, and everything went black.

Chapter Sixteen

Beth

Beth believed an individual day could have its own temperament. Every now and then, in her experience, there came along a slice of time that had a unique character or quality. It created a particular impression among a large group of people or cast a certain mood over the land, over Whimsy. It had its own spirit, in a sense.

The third Thursday of November seemed such a day.

As soon as she awoke alone that morning, over an hour after David had left for work, Beth felt the air around her resonating with quiet tension. She'd known then what type of day enveloped her. It was a day of regret. It was a day of sorrow and isolation, a day of vague but deep-seated shame that crept outwards and upwards like vines through a fog. It was a day that would feel like wandering empty city streets in a pre-dawn mist, if she let it. So she couldn't let it. Instead, she'd decided to meet the day of regret with resolve.

Pushing the negativity away was easy enough at first, as she got ready and walked to work. But as the day progressed, Beth found it harder and harder to keep herself from dwelling on book club secrets and dead dogs and fights with David and attempts to make up with David and so on. The day's temperament, its theme, never fully left her mind until she saw the clinic's last client walk into the waiting room with a blue cat carrier as she peered through the tinted windows of one of the exam room doors. Of all the pet owners in Whimsy, the one who ambled into the animal hospital that evening, twenty-

five minutes late for Dr. Anderson's and Beth's final appointment of the day, somehow ended up being Tim. *Tim* Tim. Of Tim's Toy Store. Mrs. Garrison's nephew Tim. The surprise of it alone shoved her out of her funk.

As per Dr. Anderson's policy regarding late clients, Beth stalled for twelve minutes (which was supposedly the amount of time required to demonstrate that the good doctor and her technicians wouldn't inconvenience themselves to accommodate someone else's tardiness) before finally pushing the door open and greeting Tim. He was in the middle of rising from the hard plastic seat when he recognized her, lost his balance, and almost dropped his cat carrier. He barely managed to fumble it back into his arms before the creature inside began yowling and rattling it on its own.

"Hi. Uhh, Beth. Hi. Hi, Beth," Tim stammered before clearing his throat. He stood, knees locked, and cradled the shaking carrier against his chest at such an angle that the animal inside slid down toward the door, where its red and black fur bulged through the metal bars in small squares. "What a surprise! I didn't know you were a vet. Who worked here. I mean, you didn't mention that you worked as a vet. Here. Or at all. Did you?"

Beth laughed softly and stepped closer to peer into the cage. "Well, I'm just a technician here for now, which didn't really come up while I was in your store, I guess. Of course, you didn't tell me you had a cat. Unless that's a gremlin throwing a fit in there – in which case, you didn't tell me you had a gremlin."

"Oh, no, it's a cat. A bad cat, but a cat nonetheless," Tim said. He relaxed his white-knuckled grip on the carrier. "Actually, Poppy here is Minerva's sister. Her twin, kinda. You know Minerva, right?"

Just as Beth began to respond, a second exam room door swung open behind her, and her boss sauntered into the bright waiting room with her thick blond hair down and her lab coat open to reveal a tight green dress. Slim, toned at thirty-eight, and tall in low heels, Dr. Anderson tended to remind Beth of Heather at the worst possible times – and this was one of them. She reached the pair, angled her body, and stepped between them, excluding Beth from both sight and mind as she exclaimed, “Oh, wow, lucky me! Look who’s come to visit: my favorite patient-owner pair, Tim and Poppens! How are you two? Tell me everything.”

“*Poppy* and I are doing pretty well, all things considered,” Tim began as Dr. Anderson looped an arm around his shoulder and began to lead him towards one of the exam rooms. His back stiffened at the unexpected touch, and he looked back at Beth, who had no choice but to trail behind them like a puppy. “We were just enjoying some nice conversation.”

“Ahh, yes. Our little Beth is nothing if not pleasant. So agreeable and polite. I don’t think she could offend anyone if she tried,” Dr. Anderson replied without slowing or glancing back herself. Beth, still following by half a step, wanted to object to the comment almost as much as she was tempted to apologize for whatever failure of character had rendered her too nice, too timid.

By way of compromise, she did neither, but without a word turned around, walked to the front desk, and signed herself out for the day. Then she picked up her purse and strolled out of the building, leaving Dr. Anderson and Tim to make of her disappearance what they would.

Regret. Inexplicable, paralyzing regret. As soon as Beth left the clinic, it had started to creep back through the mental and emotional wires of Beth's inner self, the only self she could ever control to begin with. By the time she got home and heaved a pot of water onto the stove for the traditional Thursday night of goulash and History Channel in the Holden-Mueller house, her regret was threatening to short-circuit her brain. The problem was that regret breeds still more regret. Always.

It didn't take long for the first jolts to grow into a hazy sense of shame over finding Tim attractive – for caring about what any man besides David thought of her and what after-hours services Dr. Anderson might be providing her more handsome clients. Then that shame warped into contrition over having dared fault, even half-consciously, those who shared her flaws. The way she saw it, she certainly had enough failings to go around: Her need to be noticed, accepted, liked. Her desire to be an integral member of a tight-knit community, even if that group were bound more by willful, shared delusion than true camaraderie. Her aversion to direct conflict. Her affinity for abstract, meaningless, self-obsessed ramble, in which she knew she was indulging even now.

And what had that accomplished, besides leading her further and further down the list of the most unbearable, reproach-worthy moments of her existence? She was already reliving the late night when, shortly after moving to Whimsy, she'd tearfully confessed to David how much she sometimes hated him for upsetting her life in Columbus. Moments later, that, in turn, traced her back to her college boyfriend, her first love, whom she had driven away with frequent, empty, alcohol-soaked threats to draw a game of pick-up sticks on her thigh with a broken razor or drown herself in the shower.

The next memory hit her differently. It narrated herself in her head, in her own voice. It told a story, one that went:

One night, when you were seven years old, you awoke from a dream about a toilet flushing, its black and white waters swirling like an optical illusion, to find a warm wet spot growing beneath you. You'd always been a vivid dreamer as a child, and this wasn't the first time you'd had to wake her mother for a midnight sheet change.

As you'd done each of the other times you drank a few too many glasses of water before bed, you crept to your bedroom door and eased it open. But instead of a darkened hallway and silence, you found light streaming out of the doorway to the kitchen, draining downhill towards you and bringing with it your parents' sharp, staccato whispers. So you followed their voices back to their source, flattening yourself against the wall just out of sight. You even drew your thin cotton nightgown tight around your legs, because you could just imagine a stray ruffle drifting into the doorway and giving you away.

"Wayne! I'm sorry, but you need to calm down," your mother said, seemingly unaware of her new audience. "I could try to find some more coupons, save some money so we can get it replaced."

"Oh? And just where do you think you'll find a coupon for a new bumper? Did Ford start making bundle deals for reckless housewives while I wasn't looking?" Your father was still drinking back then, though you knew nothing about it yet. He and your mom wouldn't become missionaries for several more years.

Remember how it all sounded, though? You had known from their tones that the vein in your father's forehead was probably bulging under the rim of his faded blue cap,

and your mother was likely close to tears. So you fled from the light and the whispers, back down the hallway, back into your small bedroom, where you shoved the humidity-swollen door back into its frame. The scraping sent down a flurry white paint flecks that landed on you bare feet, but you paid that no mind either. Instead, you dove for your twin bed, kneeled beside it with clasped hands that appeared white and skeletal in the moonlight. And you prayed.

Dear God, please let my mother and father stop arguing. Make sure they love each other forever and ever. Amen.

And then you climbed back into your bed, and you curled yourself around the cooling puddle in the center so that the ridge of your spine grated against the end table on the left. It was effective, for the most part. Only the right elbow of your nightgown got stained yellow. You could shove it down to the bottom of your hamper in the morning, and it would be like it never happened at all.

At last, Beth was succumbing completely to the day's unique spirit, to its despondency. She soon found herself rocking back and forth on her heels in front of the stove and the bubbling water with her eyes squeezed shut, muttering *No, no. No. Don't remember that. Think about anything else. Butterflies. Clues. Bananas. Anything.* under her breath. Uselessly, she fought to repress memories of being fifteen years old and slipping wrinkled five- and ten-dollar bills from her parents' wallets. She'd intended to stash away the money and eventually spend it on all the trinkets her hormone-addled, pubescent ego assured her mom and dad owed her. And at the time, she hadn't even felt guilt. That was probably the worst part now.

The adult Beth, the Beth of the present, struggled to regain composure as she added bow-tie noodles to the boiling water, stirred, waited, stirred again, strained the pasta, and then began mixing in the ground beef and tomato sauce. Nonetheless, she still hadn't reached any type of conclusion when David sauntered into the kitchen and dropped his keys into the chalice her parents had given them for their engagement. In fact, she didn't even notice him for several seconds or look up from the stove until he'd said her name twice.

“Oh, hey, honey,” she said, screwing up her eyes and shaking her head a couple times to refocus herself. “Were you saying something?”

“Ha! Not yet!”

As David spoke, he shot her that crinkly-eyed smile she'd fallen in love with. The one she'd let herself become addicted to before she'd realized that those types of smiles only become rarer and rarer after the first, heady months of any relationship, no matter how functional. Now that smile, when it did appear, made her stomach grow warm and heavy. It let her pretend that she and David were still the blushing kids, still the couple, they'd been two long years before. She could believe that their relationship was actually aging in reverse, and they would continue to get more innocent, naïve, infatuated for eternity. They just had to wait out this transitional peak.

Beth laughed back, high on her tissue paper moon, and said, “I'm sorry. I was totally in my own little world.”

“Yeah? And what were you thinking about in Beth world?”

In the millisecond it took to pull her gaze from David's mouth to his eyes, Beth realized that she couldn't tell him the truth. She'd never be able to confide her most

private, irrational demons to someone else without sounding vain and deranged. She couldn't put into words the chain of despair his arrival had cut short. Especially when that chain led back to Tim and what had undoubtedly been a fleeting moment of chilly feet.

"Just puzzling over the treasure hunt hints," she said.

"Did you have any luck figuring them out?"

David walked over to her and leaned down to pluck a soft bow-tie from the steaming pot with his right hand. As he did, he reached out to steady himself, and his left hand brushed against the small of her back. Beth closed her eyes, trying to remember the last time she'd been able to take such a moment for granted. She couldn't be certain, but she decided it was before the stresses of surrendering Canens, of moving, of planning a wedding, and of becoming a part of Whimsy had descended upon them. Finally, she reopened her eyes, content that this comfortable intimacy would soon enough become the norm once again.

"Maybe. I don't know. I was thinking about Special Selves Wilt," she said, almost without thinking. It sounded true enough. David walked over to the counter and sat down on a barstool, but still seemed to be paying attention, so she pressed on. "Do you think that might be an anagram of the author's actual name?"

"That sounds more likely than anything else I can think of," he said.

"But, if that is the case, the name would have to contain three *Ss*, a *W*, and three *Ls*. And it could be anyone."

"I'm sure you'll figure it out later. You're the smartest woman I know, after all. But right now, I'm famished because I skipped lunch, so let's eat."

David pulled two ceramic bowls out of a cupboard and set them down beside the stove so Beth could fill them with goulash. Once she did, she watched him take his into the living room and turn on the television, waiting for him to call to her, to ask her if she was coming.

Suddenly, as she lingered there, her thoughts turned to religion. Beth had been agnostic for quite a while now. She'd formally shed the pretense of her withered faith only a couple years after that night when she prayed for her parents' marriage, shortly before she'd started stealing from them. At the time, she'd also decided that the allure of Christianity and other salvation-based religions stemmed from a single human weakness: the fear of death. Of the unknown. Of nonexistence.

Now, she wasn't so sure. Now, she was starting to think that the force that pulled so many people toward religion was a god's supreme ability to forgive what the guilty couldn't themselves. Only a god could nullify the electric remorse that would otherwise sear certain moments into the mind and the soul. It all came down to regret.

Chapter Seventeen

Emma

As could only be expected, Catherine showed up for her Friday morning interview with Emma and Principal Garcia twenty-eight minutes too soon. Emma had arrived earlier still, however. She'd been determined to wait for her book club associate in front of the main administrative building, like Cerberus standing at the gate to Hades, so wait she had. Now she watched Catherine approach from her shaded position beneath a metal overhang that continuously threatened to drop strips of its peeling, rubbery blue paint into her hair. It reminded her of sitting out on her parents' porch with her elder brother during the long summer evenings of their early childhoods. The sky was usually overcast in those months, and often rivulets of rain gestated between the gapping wooden planks above their heads, until the small streams were swollen with overdue drops and finally ready to give birth, breaking water on the skulls of the dirty-faced youngsters below.

Even across the courtyard, Emma could tell her comrade's white blouse had a distinctive, overly-starched stiffness to it that was forcing her bony shoulders up and making her appear even less human than usual, while her black skirt hung limply from her narrow hips, drowning her knees in its loose, polyester-blend embrace. Worse still, Catherine's unpowdered forehead gleamed almost as lustroously as her clunky patent leather clogs did. It was truly a nightmare for any creature that possessed eyes and a

sense of style, and Emma couldn't have been more delighted about it. But that was just the beginning of her good fortune.

"Hello, Catherine," Emma said, stepping out from the shade and into the yellow glare of the distant November sun.

Catherine's pale lips jerked apart like a couple of teenagers caught making out. "What are you doing here?"

"Helping Principal Garcia interview you, of course," Emma replied with a smile wide enough to display most of her teeth. "As a key member of the school board, I'm very involved in the process of selecting someone to teach the writing classes."

Catherine dropped her portfolio instantly. At least a dozen papers flitted to the sidewalk around her disproportionately large feet, their corners landing in muddy puddles and darkened globs of ancient disfigured gum, and several of the pages curled and yellowed around their damp edges. Others clung soggily to the gritty concrete and tore when Catherine bent down, teetering uncertainly on stiff legs and weak ankles, to pry them loose. With a tickle of pity, Emma stooped to help the poor, flustered stick-bug of a woman collect her materials.

"Don't!" Catherine barked, snatching a piece of paper from Emma's hand. "Let me do that, so you don't get everything out of order. And should you even be allowed to help evaluate me, given our personal relationship? That seems rather untoward."

The urgency in Catherine's movement and the severity of her steel-eyed glare suddenly reminded Emma of Maw Maw. Maw Maw had been just like that: peculiar and controlling. So concerned with propriety. For instance, as far back as Emma could remember, Maw Maw had been ashamed of her jailbird son-in-law. She worried

constantly that his presence in her grandchildren's lives would spoil them, turn them rotten and diseased from the inside out, if his genes hadn't done so already. Never mind the fact that it was her daughter who had locked herself in the family's garage with her car running and left them with the man in the first place.

Maw Maw's paranoia had been so complete, her disdain of the man's low breeding so deeply-rooted, in fact, that at the end of each of Emma's and her brothers' rare, treasured visits to the prison their father spent their childhoods in, she would fish a crumpled paper napkin out of the tan leather satchel that hung from her right shoulder. Then she'd raise the brown wad all the way up to her lips, as if she were planning to kiss it or whisper a secret into it. But she always spit in it instead, quietly so none of the strange men in the room would notice her breach in ladylike behavior. Finally, the old woman would call over one of the boys – Pete, usually, since he was the youngest and most eager to please his perpetually discontent grandmother – and scrub shiny pink orbits into his cheeks, leaving entire solar systems of splotchy raw skin behind when she turned to her next victim. Curiously, though, Maw Maw never once touched the dried, yellow-green snot that so often caked her young grandchildren's nostrils.

Emma could just imagine Catherine doing the same. She straightened her back and looked over Catherine's head at a couple of teenagers, Casey's friends actually, stuffing wadded up jackets and brown paper lunch sacks into their lockers. "No, actually," she answered. "Principal Garcia and I discussed it at some length, and I checked every policy book we have. There's not a single thing that can keep me from assisting in your interview or the board's deliberations."

Principal Garcia ambled out of the administrative building the instant Emma finished speaking, as if following a cue in a script he held before him. To his surprise, but Emma's delight, he found his favorite candidate hunched over with one hand on the filthy sidewalk to prop herself up and the other tugging the hem of her loose skirt back over her knobby knees. Catherine leapt up at once and greeted him, only to drop her papers again almost immediately. Together, the two of them gathered her pages for a second time, and then he made her pass him the entire stack so he could carry it for her.

Emma, feeling more than a little vindicated, simply let the scene unfold before her. Over the next couple of minutes, Catherine's thin gold watch pinched her wrist as she reached out to shake his hand. Her eyes also went blank when he asked her how she'd been, and once inside, she managed to spill her coffee all over the carpet in his office. All this before the interview actually began.

When the three of them first sat down at Principal Garcia's desk, he and Emma on one side and Catherine on the other, the two women did more staring than talking. Mr. Garcia chattered about weather and work, getting the small talk out of the way, while Catherine looked at Emma, clearly still perplexed. The uncomfortable angle at which she'd tilted her head was sharp angle enough to give somebody a sympathy crick, and her face was contorted into a semi-permanent expression of confusion, tinted with the possibility of anger. She seemed unable to look away as she tried to process Emma's presence. Emma, meanwhile, just beamed at her. She'd already won this war, while Catherine didn't even seem to know that Whimsy was a battlefield, that it always had been.

Finally, the school's principal unbuttoned his navy blazer, and the trio got to the questions, which started fairly general in nature. Mr. Garcia asked *Why did you become a teacher?* and *What is your philosophy on teaching?* as more of a formality than anything else, since Catherine was, obviously, already in his employ and had probably fielded those exact inquiries at her first interview. She babbled something about her love of learning and literature and expressed her standard-issue, out-of-a-generic-tin-can desire to help shape the young minds of rising generations before Emma cut in to fire her first bullet.

She asked, "Now, would you say you characterize yourself as a flexible person? As I'm sure you're aware, flexibility is a crucial quality in the classroom, especially ones devoted to a creative discipline."

Catherine stiffened, coughed, and then stuttered, "Flexible? Me? Sure. Yes. I can be flexible. Very flexible. Although, not too flexible, of course. I'm not complaisant or... or... bendy – towards the students or anybody, really. Except my higher-ups, I suppose. I'm always deferential to them, but I'm not sure I'm saying this correctly. What I mean is: Professionally, I'm just flexible enough. Wouldn't you agree, Principal Garcia?"

The wide-eyed teacher looked over at her boss as miniscule sparkles of perspiration began appearing on her temples, desperate for a hand – or better yet, a rope ladder and a highly-trained recovery team – to pull her out of the trench she'd embedded herself within.

Such is the nature of war, honey, Emma thought, biting back a smile. Laughing at her own little trench joke would have to wait until later, no matter how much she wanted

to now. *And just a warning: I learned from the best, which is to say the worst. I served under General Maw Maw for years. You're going down.*

Instead of replying to Catherine, Mr. Garcia glanced at his co-interviewer. He had been listening to the appeal with his eyebrows raised and his round jaw tightened. Perhaps, just maybe, he was more perceptive to the power structure in the room than Emma had guessed. That deserved a reward, so she relieved him of his obligation to answer by inquiring, “Really? In that case, could you give me an example, Catherine? Just one will do. Say, a time when you had to improvise and think outside of the box – and your lesson plan – in order to help your students learn? Or even a situation in which you collaborated with other writers on a project?”

“Absolutely. Just give me a moment to think,” Catherine said, visibly trembling now. Stick-bugs broke easily, and while this one might have had the same skeletal figure, the same beak nose, the same sense of style, and the same absence of humor as Maw Maw, she had only a sliver of the conviction or self-righteousness. Catherine’s loss was Emma’s gain, though, and Emma was more than willing to show her the error of her ways. Preferably before she ever stepped foot in another classroom with Casey, or any other good, impressionable high school student.

“Perhaps we should come back to this question in a bit,” Mr. Garcia suggested after several moments of silence, during which Catherine had sat rigidly in her chair with her elbows locked, her hands trying to choke each other in her lap, and only her eyes moving. She’d been casting her gaze back and forth along the floor, walls, and ceiling.

With a poisonous smile, Emma cleared her throat delicately and said, “Yes, if that question is too hard for you, Catherine, we’ll move right on. Could you tell us instead how many pieces of your writing have been published? And where?”

Catherine licked her lips and muttered something almost too low for Emma to hear.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t quite catch that. Could you repeat yourself, dear?” she asked.

“Nothing. I haven’t had anything published. But I do know how to write, and I know I could teach it! If you and Principal Garcia don’t think so, though, I’m not sure why I’m here. I don’t even understand why this formal interview is necessary at all. I just offered to pick up the creative writing classes, which I am certainly qualified to teach, and suddenly everyone’s acting as if I’m vying to be poet laureate. What is *happening* here?”

“So nothing published at all, then? Interesting,” Emma replied slowly, pretending to make a note on the legal pad in front of her. An outburst from Catherine was unexpected, but nothing she couldn’t handle.

“Catherine, I’m so sorry if we’ve upset you or given you the impression that we don’t want you to have the classes,” Mr. Garcia said. He leaned forward over his desk and tried to pat Catherine’s hand. She set her palm on the wooden surface and let him, but her nostrils flared at his touch. “I suppose this all got a little blown out of proportion somehow. I just wanted to have a chat to satisfy the school board, go by the book, you know, and I’m sure Emma feels the same way. She’s just trying to stay impartial and not show you any favoritism because you’re friends. But perhaps we could start to wrap it up. I think we’re almost done anyway, aren’t we?”

He directed the last part at Emma, who attempted to straighten the already orderly papers of her legal pad in a manner reminiscent of a judge thumping a gavel.

“Certainly. In fact, I just have one last question for our candidate here, and it’s an easy one: Where do you see yourself in ten years?”

“Where do I see myself in ten years?” Catherine echoed, her voice even duller than usual. “Are you serious? How is that an easy one?”

“Hmm...” Emma said, picking up her pen once more.

Chapter Eighteen

Heather

Heather insisted on returning to her job in the city the day after her minor incident, that brief loss of consciousness. Chris, of course, protested. He wanted to continue tending to his wife, nursing her, smothering her, but she would have none of that. His devoted attention weighed too heavily on Heather's shoulders, as did Shelley's continued existence and the approaching deadline for the WLBS's first treasure hunt. By early Friday, she felt as if she'd been wrapped in a quilt of impending failure, ensnaring her within an itchy woolen blanket of her own ruin. So, facing the prospect of nearly-certain suffocation, Heather did the only thing she could to ease her claustrophobia. She did what she always did when she needed to escape the grip of human existence. She wrapped David Holden in some blankets of her own.

That's how Whimsy's uncrowned queen ending up spending her midday work break neither eating lunch, nor trying to riddle out the meaning of Emma's treasure hunt clues, but instead sweating and screaming and moaning and mewling in the arms of Beth's fiancé. The idea that she might feel guilt over the act didn't bother her. For as far as she could tell, as she could usually convince herself, the unspeakably delightful things she did with and to David weren't wrong or immoral, at least not on her part. She oughtn't be bound by common human rules, because she wasn't a common human. At the very minimum, she was Whimsy royalty – and, at best, possibly not even wholly human. She knew what people said, thought, when they looked at her. Indeed, she was

well aware of it. Some called her a cat, some a bird, some a She-Demon descended from Medusa, Alecto, and Aglaope. The particulars didn't really matter to her, as long as everyone understood that she, Heather, was a predator always and prey never. As long as they still worshipped at her feet and wept at her departure. Like David did.

That was the wonderful thing about David. David recognized her beauty and desired her for that alone. He didn't cherish the idea of domesticating her, of taking a piece of her soul and growing old with her, and he had never fallen in love with the imaginary children she couldn't bear, as Christopher did and had. At the moment, as the end of her lunch break neared, in fact, David was content with merely lounging under a thin blue sheet on her mahogany claw foot bed, watching her nude form gather the wrinkled garments they'd thrown on the floor together. While she wriggled back into her red satin underthings, his eyes continued doing what his quivering hands had already finished – adoring her.

Eventually Heather covered enough of herself for words to return to David, as they sadly always did minutes before she kicked him out. When his ability to speak arrived, he rolled over onto his left side, pinning his own arm beneath the weight of his torso, to watch her zip up her tight black pencil skirt, and asked, “So how's the treasure hunt going, anyway?”

Perhaps David hadn't yet worn out his entertainment value, after all. Instead of responding right away, Heather laughed, sat on the edge of her bed with her slingback heels dangling from her fingers, and then pulled her tousled red waves to one side to showcase her narrow white shoulders as she looked back at him. There was no denying

that she knew how to work her angles. It was all about torque, controlled tension, and she'd mastered that art long ago. Under Shelley's tutelage, actually.

"Come on now. You know I can't tell you that, baby. You do live with the enemy, remember?"

David didn't even flinch at her reference to Beth. Most of the time, he didn't mind talking about her, as long as neither of them actually said her name.

"Aw, come on, Heather-hottie," he pleaded, biting his full lower lip for comedic emphasis. "I'm just curious, and I won't tell a soul. Promise. I know you know something. You're too cunning not to."

A fox. Of course. Yet another animal to add to the list of her potential spirit creatures. *Cunning like a fox*. That was the saying, wasn't it? That's what people called women like her? *Cunning like a fox*? It wasn't cunning like a fish or a frog or a flying squirrel. Those just didn't make any sense. No, Heather was cunning like a fox. Like a red-haired bird-fox. Like a red-haired bird-cat-queen-goddess-fox. The phrase about summed her up, if she did think so herself, even if it wouldn't fit on a nametag or on the job title line of her resume.

"Prove it," she told David, baiting him with one perfect, arched eyebrow. She knew the trick would work, because it always worked. Perfection and baiting were two of her many specialties.

Then the still-naked man in her bed tugged himself to his knees, crawled over to her on all fours, and leaned in close enough to kiss her, so close she could feel breath move her hair, before suddenly pulling his face back a few inches, just enough to look her in the eyes and make sure she saw his smirk. Apparently, David had a few ploys of his

own. But Heather should have guessed that. She should have known there was a reason she liked him so. It wasn't like he'd been the only testosterone machine in Whimsy willing to worship her on command, after all. She'd chosen David as soon as she'd seen him at the block party she and Chris had held a few weeks after Beth joined the WLBS, and now she understood why. They were alike, him and her.

Of course, his looks didn't hurt either. David was slim and tall and had been wearing deep indigo jeans and a wrinkled white button-up when they'd met. His dark, curly hair and semi-prominent cheekbones made him memorable and handsome, yet not unusually so. Overall, he fit Heather's usual type just enough to gain her attention, but not so well that he constantly reminded her of Chris. The opportunity had been too perfect to pass up.

Without letting the grin slip from his lips, David stretched out his left hand and picked up a lock of her hair, twisting it around two of his fingers over and over again as he said, "Well, for one thing, what exactly would I tell her? 'Oh, by the way, after I screwed your gal pal Heather, she revealed what the first clue means?'"

There, at that precise moment, David paused long enough to roll his eyes and fall right into his lover's trap.

"And besides, there's no way she'll every get to that book first. Not at the rate she's going. In fact, the only thing she's been about to figure out at all is that 'Special Selves Wilt' is an anagram for the author's name or something."

Ever since high school, Heather had liked to believe that few things could take her by surprise, but that did. She froze with her blouse halfway on and blurted, "That's shockingly brilliant. On Emma's part, I mean, not Beth's. I pretty much expected she'd

think up something because that's all she does, right? Thinks about things with that strange little brain of hers all day long? But Emma... I didn't know Emma even knew what an anagram is."

Heather had seen David flinch and stand up when she said Beth's name, but she couldn't find it within herself to care at the moment, not now. So she let him begin dressing without protest. As he reached for his crumpled boxers, he finally shrugged and said, "I guess. But, Be— she hasn't deciphered it yet."

"Why not?" Heather asked from her seat on the edge of the bed. While she spoke, a single dark curl fell across his forehead, and she watched him run his hand through his hair to push it back.

"I'm not sure. I guess she's been too busy with the clinic and the wedding plans and everything. I keep telling her to just use an anagram solver. I mean, there's like a million of them on the internet. But she says she couldn't, that she'd feel like it was cheating or something. It's weird, but she has this... code. A bunch of rules about what's right and what's wrong. And she always wants to do what's right."

"How sweet," Heather whispered, pulling herself up and into David's arms, against David's warmth, to kiss him goodbye. "I don't."

He departed shortly after that, leaving Heather alone in her and Christopher's room once again. She immediately rushed to her desk, where her slim laptop lay in the black leather bag her company had bestowed upon her, as a reward for her loyalty. It took her less than two minutes to turn the machine on, find a website, and get herself an answer.

To no one in particular, just the walls and the empty air, she murmured, “So. The mysterious Special Selves Wilt is none other than...”

Chapter Nineteen

Beth

Beth received a phone call on Friday night from a panicked Mrs. Garrison, who begged her to attend a last-minute meeting of the WLBS the next day. The younger woman, concerned by the pitch of the older one's voice, agreed without hesitation or question. Thus, she and her four co-members gathered in the Mystery Room of Agèd Pages at noon on Saturday. At first, they all just sat at the card table together, each of the visitors too busy shivering to ask Mrs. Garrison why they were there. A late-autumn or early-winter cold snap had settled upon Whimsy in the early hours of the morning, so the shop's warm, bright den offered a welcome change from the chill and muted gray obscurity outdoors. Beth, for once, truly looked forward to Mrs. Garrison's scalding, steaming cinnamon tea.

As she thawed, Beth became more aware of the tension in the room. No one spoke or seemed to care to. Mrs. Garrison slowly drummed her fingers against the table, while Emma watched blankly. Heather's unsmiling mouth had a skeptical set to it, and there was a deep vertical crease between Catherine's pinched eyebrows. Most of them looked as if they felt anxious yet drained and somehow sealed off from the others. Occasionally Emma sniffed, or Catherine coughed into elbow.

Finally, the tea kettle screeched from its place atop the hot pad in the kitchenette portion of the storage room, and Mrs. Garrison rushed out to collect it. When she returned, she filled everyone's cups with swirling brown liquid. Beth wrapped her cold

pale fingers around porcelain and eagerly raised it to her lips, letting the tea burn her tongue as it slipped back toward her throat.

“Alright, y’all,” Mrs. Garrison began at last. She had just taken her seat and folded her hands together, all business. “I have a couple matters I want to discuss. First off, thank you for all coming on such short notice. That was superb, since I’m sure everyone had other Saturday plans in mind. But secondly, well, I bet you’re wondering *why* you had to come, and here’s the thing: I’m not sure if any of y’all remember, but we gave ourselves until yesterday to find Emma’s book. And as far as I know, no one’s been able to figure out both the clues and claim the prize yet. Am I right about that?”

Yesterday? Had two weeks already passed since Emma distributed her maps? Beth hadn’t even managed to fully figure out one of the clues, let alone both. The outermost layer of her cheeks grew warm and tightened at Mrs. Garrison’s words and her own realization of failure. She stared down at the vinyl surface of the card table, which was missing its usual table cloth.

Mrs. Garrison continued her speech, chattering sympathetically about how busy each of the ladies had surely been and how obscure Emma’s clues were. At length, she concluded, “So what I’d like to suggest is that we extend the hunting period, or the searching stage or what-have-you, one more week. I cross-my-heart-and-hope-to-die promise I could still come up with new clues in time for our next meeting, and we’d all get another chance to find Emma’s book, since she put so much thought and care into her clues and maps. Does that sound good to y’all?”

It certainly did to Beth, so she peeked around at the other women, anxious to see if they would agree, and found them doing the same thing. The each nodded, albeit to varying degrees, and turned back to Mrs. Garrison.

“That sounds like a reasonable proposition,” Catherine offered, once it became clear to everyone that none of the others wanted to speak first.

“I’d like that too,” Beth added. Her head bounced higher and lower than anyone else’s with her typical, self-conscious enthusiasm. She was trying to compensate for the fact that Emma and Heather were each acting uncharacteristically reserved. “In fact, maybe we should do that for all of our hunts. With the holidays coming up and family stuff, it’s a pretty busy part of the year, after all. I’m sure we could all use the extra time.”

“I know *I* could,” Heather finally contributed. She looked steadily at Beth as she stretched back in her chair, arching her spine into a lazy lounging pose like an ancient Egyptian royal cat. For a moment, in Beth’s mind at least, she was Mafdet, re-embodied and sitting not at the pharaoh’s feet, but in his throne.

“Yes, well,” Mrs. Garrison coughed. The older woman ducked her head and turning pink around her cheeks and nose for an unknown reason. Perhaps she perceived it as well. Perhaps she could feel the power Heather possessed, the primal energy she seemed to channel with a toss of her curls. Perhaps she too was struck with reverence and respect and fear. There was just always something so enchanting about the way Heather moved.

“Okay, we can do that,” Mrs. Garrison continued, mercifully distracting Beth once again. “Thanks, ladies. Meeting adjourned.”

With those three words, the club's founder drew the shortest WLBS meeting ever to a close, while the tea was still settling in her guests' cups. Whimsy's own friend to all, stranger to none, and champion of small talk had just dismissed the other members after less than five minutes. It was odd, disconcerting even, but Beth couldn't mind too much, because it left her with more time for what she planned to do next.

Her scheme was a fairly new one. Only a day and a half had passed since Beth dreamt up the idea as she lay in her darkened bedroom and listened to David's breathing, since she promised herself she'd go through with it before curling her own body around her dozing fiancé's form and letting herself fall asleep with her head on his pillow. What was more, she'd gotten David to agree to help a mere fifteen hours ago, and, if she were honest with herself, it was only then that she really knew she'd do it. But already she felt as if she'd waited far longer than a couple days – months, half a year at least. And in a way, she had been.

Beth bounded out of Agèd Pages with her fingertips tingling and her lips humming "Sweet Caroline" as soon as she and Catherine had finished helping Mrs. Garrison put up the chairs and card table, but she didn't get far. She only made it halfway between the store's porch and the sidewalk, in fact. That was where she stood when she pulled her cell phone from her coat pocket and glanced down at the smudged touch screen. It showed a missed call and a new voicemail from David, and she knew what the message contained before she listened to it.

David had dropped her off before the meeting and was supposed to pick her and accompany her downtown once it was finished, but he couldn't. He'd have to leave her

waiting in the brisk November air. She'd have to tread orange and yellow leaves underfoot alone as she walked to her destination. Some crisis had developed at work, his boss needed him to come in on his Saturday, everyone was panicking – the usual stuff. He gave a more specific explanation in his message, something to do with servers and critical applications, but Beth had already stopped listening by that point. Instead, she chose to imagine an entire tech team running around the cubicles putting out monitor fires as she closed her phone and turned back to the store for one last wistful look. She would have giggled at the mental image, if she weren't so disappointed for herself and worried for David. His boss had him working so much these days that he kept coming home famished from having to skip lunch.

Before Beth could make herself turn back around and begin her trudge down Erstwhile Avenue, Mrs. Garrison emerged through the front door of Agèd Pages. She held a dented watering can and a half-eaten snack cake in one hand, plus a slightly abused copy of *In the Sanctuary of Outcasts* in the other.

“Oh, hey, Bethany!” she called. “I thought everyone was gone, gone away by now. Did you forget something, dear?”

The inside of Beth's mouth suddenly felt as if it had been coated in thick, creamy peanut butter as she realized what she must do. She despised having to ask people for things.

“No,” she started, trying to douse her anxiety with short, simple words. It didn't work, so she thought about her first meeting with the WLBS, when Mrs. Garrison baked four different types of pie because she didn't know which Beth preferred, and told herself to calm down. That didn't work, either. “But I do have a favor to plead. I'm really sorry,

but it's cold out, and I could use a ride somewhere. And maybe some company once I get there."

The heat rising from Beth's cheeks was making her eyes water. Licking her lips repetitively, she attempted to give the older woman a quick explanation about David's job and his message, about where she was going and why she didn't want to go alone, but she found herself rambling before long. Nothing could stop her from blurting half-coherent sentences about her car and the neighbor's alarm system and her old job in Winter Haven. Mrs. Garrison, thankfully, stopped her when she got to the coffee she'd spilled that morning.

"Beth, honey, it's not a problem at all. I promise. It's a short drive, and I'd love to take you, as long as we don't tell Minerva! Wouldn't want her thinking we were looking for her replacement! Just let me get my keys."

Mrs. Garrison spun around, trotted back into the store, and disappeared. Beth stood at the bottom of the porch for a few minutes, wishing she'd brought something heavier than her short navy blue trench coat, before the other woman returned. When she finally sashayed back through the doorway, she was holding an accessory-laden set of keys and her oversized bowling bag.

"My ID's in there somewhere, but I don't feel like digging it out right now," Mrs. Garrison explained, nodding toward her purse. Then she winked and added, "Plus, there's a pocket bible and a travel bottle of whiskey in the front pocket, and those are the two things a girl should never, ever leave the house without. Or leave the shop, in this case."

Beth tried not to stare at Mrs. Garrison long enough to betray her surprise. There was still so much she didn't know about the other members of the WLBS. When Mrs.

Garrison turned toward a line of cars parked along the curb, Beth shook her head and pulled her eyes back into focus. She trotted toward the burgundy station wagon her companion was manually unlocking, reaching the car as Mrs. Garrison slid into the driver's seat. She followed suit and had fastened her seat belt and pulled the door shut before she realized that Mrs. Garrison had been talking the entire time.

"I actually tried to get my nephew, my sister's son, to join our ranks a couple years back," Mrs. Garrison continued as turned the key in the engine and twisted around to look out the rear window. Her cheeks were pink and her eyes bright and gleaming. "But he said he didn't want to 'ruin the sanctity of the sisters.' I'm pretty sure he meant that he didn't want to be in a book club with the word *ladies* in the name, though."

"Your nephew? You mean Tim?" Beth asked.

Mrs. Garrison finished pulling the station wagon away from the sidewalk and then glanced at Beth inquisitively. "You know Tim? Did I introduce you two? You know, I've been meaning to for a while. He's about your age, and he's kept to himself a lot since his parents passed, but I've been thinking you two might make for good friends. I don't remember actually introducing you, though."

"Oh, no!" Beth quickly corrected. "You didn't introduce us. I met him when I bought a present for Jake's birthday party, and then he actually came into the clinic a few days ago."

"Emma's gift registry for Jake's party! That's right! I knew that. So sorry. Sometimes those little details just slip my mind."

Mrs. Garrison sped down Erstwhile Avenue, in the direction of downtown Whimsy, and Beth gripped her armrests as they sped toward a stop sign. She had been

warned by Heather and Emma about Mrs. Garrison's penchant for testing both her car's brakes and her passengers' reflexes.

"Don't worry about it!" she said sympathetically once she felt safe enough to exhale. "I'm that way with chores and the million little hoops Dr. Anderson has me jump through for every dog, cat, rat, and beta fish that comes into clinic. In fact, I make multiple to-do lists every day. It drives David crazy, because I leave scrunched post-it notes everywhere."

Mrs. Garrison laughed, and the car swerved toward the center of the road. "I know that feeling through and through. You pull your hand out of your coat pocket, and *voilà* – a snowstorm of receipts in June!"

"Exactly!" Beth's cheeks tightened as she smiled without realizing it. "You know, I've been thinking about adding 'Throw away to-do list' at the bottom of each one. The problem is that I never actually get to the bottom of a list before I misplace it and start a new one."

Mrs. Garrison and Beth continued their discussion as they made their way down the narrow street, though the conversation seemed to morph with every block they passed. Before the pair reached Henderson Street, Mrs. Garrison looked over and asked, "Did anyone ever tell you about the early days of the WLBS?"

"Umm, not really," Beth said. They were close to their destination now, but the topic intrigued her nonetheless. "I always meant to ask, but it never seemed like the right time. I know it was your idea, so you're kind of the society's founder. That's about it, though."

“Really? You’ve been a member for four months, and no one thought to give you a quick history lesson? Shame! Shame on us!”

Despite her words, Mrs. Garrison’s eyes were even brighter than before, and she looked satisfied. She made a sharp left onto Live Oak and parked the car in front of a yellow Spanish-style building. Neither woman moved to get out. Mrs. Garrison took a second to squirm in her seat, and Beth could tell there was a story coming, so she settled in too.

“Well, anyway. You were right about the WLBS being my idea, but I’d say the founders are all three of the original members. When the WLBS first got off the ground eight years ago, you see, it was just me, Catherine, and Denise, my old friend from grade school. Just like now, we met at Pages every two weeks, but back then we only read classics. A lot of Austen, some Twain. Dickens, Alcott, Doyle – you know, those types. That lasted for about two years. And then Denise and her husband moved off to Colorado, so Catherine and I were all by our lonesome for a bit.”

“Really? It was just the two of you?” Beth asked, forgetting herself in Mrs. Garrison’s words. Her vocal cords didn’t feel rusty, as they usually did when she was listening to someone she hadn’t known for at least a year. “But, then, what about Heather and Emma? When did they join?”

“Well, Emma joined about five or six years ago, after our churches held a joint book drive for the library at Whimsy Elementary. Heather started showing up with her after a couple meetings. They were next door neighbors at the time, if I remember correctly, and I think Emma sort of had to twist Heather’s arm to get her to come at first.”

“She didn’t want to join?”

“No...” Mrs. Garrison leaned in towards Beth and lowered her voice, though no one stood anywhere near the station wagon. “The thing is, Heather and Christopher were still newlyweds then. More or less. So Heather wasn’t real big on spending her nights out of the house – or the bedroom, for that matter. Apparently, they wouldn’t answer the door for anyone or anything, and the police even had to go over there and tell the two of them to quiet down a few times! At least, that’s what Emma told me.”

“Oh, wow,” Beth said after a moment of quiet reflection. “I had no idea Heather and Chris were that passionately in love.”

“Well,” Mrs. Garrison started. She abruptly cut herself off, however, snapping her mouth shut as a strange, dark look came over her face. She straightened back up and looked out her window, away from Beth. “That’s neither here nor there. I think we’ve wasted enough time sitting here, prattling on. Let’s go inside, shall we?”

The pair unfastened their seat belts and stepped out of the car, and then Mrs. Garrison took Beth by the elbow and led her into the yellow building. Beth hadn’t actually been inside it before, but she quickly found that the front room was decorated to look as cheerful and welcoming as possible, with walls painted alternating primary colors and rows of white paw prints bordering the top and bottom. A series of large squiggles traced onto the opposite wall spelled out *Whimsy Animal Shelter*. Almost immediately, a young woman wearing a blue apron and a sloppy ponytail emerged through a swinging door and asked, “Hi, there! How can I help you? Are you lovely ladies thinking about adopting a pet?”

“Yes!” Mrs. Garrison chimed.

“A dog,” Beth added. “I’m a technician at Dr. Anderson’s clinic, and I’m still sort of new to town, but I’m ready to start looking for my next dog.”

“Fantastic! We have a lot of really sweet dogs looking for furrever homes at the moment. I can lead you back to the kennels right now and introduce you to a couple new friends!”

Beth nodded, and she and Mrs. Garrison followed the perky woman back toward the swinging door. As soon as they were past the welcoming room, though, she started to regret the whole plan. The corridors in the back were painted in the same simple colors as the front, but the paint had faded noticeably, and thin, white, vein-like cracks wove between scuff marks and mysterious stains near the bottom of the walls. Plus, over the faint familiar smell of industrial disinfectants, which always filled any clinic or shelter, Beth could make out hints of urine and something she could only presume was death. Dingy laminate flooring covered the ground that she and Mrs. Garrison stepped over gingerly as their guide propelled them down a hallway and into a large rooms thunderous with barks and whines.

It all made Beth feel sick to her stomach. She’d seen too many other under-funded, under-staffed, under-regulated, and over-filled shelters to imagine that abandoned animals could find a high quality of life here. The former pets that lined to room before her – confused, anxious, trapped, and lonely as they must be – were some of Whimsy’s most vulnerable residents. It was with a truly aching heart that Beth realized that her new hometown had essentially built them a prison and made it up to look like a summer camp.

Together, Beth, Mrs. Garrison, and the perky young woman began to shuffle down a row of kennels. Some contained thin, mangy creatures with desperate

expressions, some restrained young mutts who shoved their tongues through the bar to reach a human hand, and still others held older dogs who simply leaned against the side of their cages and blinked dust out of their eyes, seemingly accustomed to being passed up. Every so often, the apron-clad woman would stop, exclaim something in much too high a pitch, and wait for Beth or Mrs. Garrison to return an enthusiastic comment. Then they'd move on the next wire box – that was, until Beth peered into one of them and saw a familiar face looking back at her.

It was the brown dog. Her little brown dog from the park, in this horrible place.

“Oh, yeah, isn't this just the most adorable little guy?” the shelter employee asked when she noticed that Beth had stopped walking. She came over and crouched at the kennel door, as Mrs. Garrison rested a hand on Beth's upper arm murmured something she didn't hear. “He's actually one of our newest residents. We found him out near Prospect Street and then spent an hour and a half trying to catch him, partially since he decided to throw himself into a stream. He's a quick little thing, long legs, deep chest, sleek curves. And, actually, quite the voice, too. He howled and howled when we finally fished him out of the water, and since he didn't have a collar or anything, we decided to call him *Canens*, after the Latin word for ‘singing.’ We liked it because it also sounds a bit like *canine*.”

Beth, who had been unconsciously stretching a hand towards the cage bars, toward the magic dog that kept finding her, dropped it as soon as she heard that name. She must have misheard it. Who besides her would name a dog *Canens*? And what were the chances that they would choose that name for this particular dog?

“Yep, our little Canens. Quite the cutie – and I think he likes you,” the woman offered as she stood back up.

“I have to go,” Beth stuttered. “I’m sorry. Mrs. Garrison... I just have to go.”

And then she fled.

Chapter Twenty

Emma

By chance, by pure dumb Whimsy luck, Emma was sitting with Virginia in the back room of Agèd Pages when Sophie, one of the store's part-time assistants, rushed in with wide eyes and bad news. It was the afternoon before Thanksgiving, and the pair of WLBS women had been watching a miniature weatherman prance across the screen of Virginia's tiny box television and predict that the next day would be the coldest of the entire year. Minerva lay napping beneath the seat of Virginia's swivel chair. As soon as Sophie appeared, though, Virginia spun to face the black-haired young woman and caused the piece of furniture to lurch forward without warning. Minerva hissed as her tail got pinched by a wheel and then slunk out of the room after the three humans failed to apologize to her. Such was the way of all cats, as far as Emma could tell.

Even as the sulking feline crept past her ankles, Sophie remained standing just inside the room, looking near her employer and Emma but not directly at them. She clutched her left hand with her right and twisted her middle, ring, and pinky fingers as slid one her feet across the floor and tucked it behind her other ankle.

"What's wrong?" Virginia demanded. Emma pulled an iced cranberry-pumpkin cookie out of a translucent plastic box in her lap and bit into it. She'd made them fresh that morning, before she'd needed a break from her home. For the moment, she doubted if even the pilgrims and Native Americans had fought as bitterly in the New World as brothers and sisters did on breaks from school.

Sophie licked her lips and said, “The police just called on the second line. They wanted to tell you – they asked me to let you know – that they think they figured out who broke the window in our Mystery Room. And they need you to go down there and discuss some stuff, I guess. Whether or not you want to press charges maybe? I’m not sure.”

Emma let the rest of her cookie drop back into the container as Virginia pitched forward in her seat, nearly tipping it over.

“Did they say who it was?” the older woman asked. She’d leveled Sophie with a stare so steady that even Emma felt its grip. “Or did they at least tell you how many? What they wanted? If there was a child involved?”

Sophie looked down at her brown feet, at a pair of strappy leather sandals that evoked her Mayan heritage. “No, they didn’t,” she said. “And I don’t know. They really didn’t mention anything specific. I’m sorry.”

Virginia rose to her feet. “Alright, I’ll just have to go down there. Sophie, you stay here, do the store clerk thing, sell some books. If I don’t get back by closing, please lock everything up before you leave. And, Emma, you’ll come with me, right?”

“Of course!” Emma said, speaking for the first time since Sophie had entered the room. “Nothing in the world could keep me from it.”

“What do you mean you still aren’t sure?” Virginia asked in a shrill tone that hurt Emma’s inner ears. “Sophie said you called us at Agèd Pages and told her you knew who broke into my store. Now, my Sophie is not a liar, so which is it? Do you have a name for me or don’t you?”

Emma and Virginia were standing in the cinderblock greeting room of the Whimsy Police Department interrogating a fresh-faced desk lackey who claimed to have no new information to give them. Or rather, Virginia was interrogating. Emma mostly watched, clutching her container of cookies. She found it oddly soothing to catch a glimpse into some drama that didn't revolve around teenagers and uneaten vegetables and curfews and arguments over who borrowed whose iPod without permission.

“Well, no, we don't have a name per se, ma'am. But—” the young police officer tried to say.

“But what? Why on God's green and brown and blue earth am I here then?” Virginia paused to glare at man from across the long laminate-topped counter that divided cops from citizens. Emma nodded in support, bristling despite herself at the way the rookie officer kept spitting out the word *ma'am* as if the letters were slightly acidic. Sarcasm was what she was hearing – and poorly concealed, unprofessional sarcasm, at that.

“Ma'am, please give me a second to explain—”

“It's alright, Peters. I'll take it from here.” Once again, the young officer had been cut off mid-defense, but this time it was by another officer, a slightly older-looking one who had just walked into the space behind the counter through a door on the right wall. This cop was blond, early-forties, and bore a certain resemblance to Tim. Perhaps it was the last part that caused Virginia's temper to seem to deflate, just as Emma had begun to consider working one up herself.

“Mrs. Virginia Garrison, I presume?” the new officer asked. “I’m sorry if there’s been some confusion. My name’s Tyler Hudson, and I’m the one who had Officer Peters here call you about the new lead we have.”

Virginia pushed her shoulders back and crossed her arms over her chest. Nevertheless, Emma could tell that her friend was softening, her anger dribbling away. “Lead? What does that mean? That you have a name? Or just a fingerprint or psychic tip or something?”

Officer Hudson chuckled and lifted the free, hinged section of counter up, beckoning for the pair of women to join him on the other side with a single slow wave of his hand. “Well, no, ma’am. As much as I wish we did, I’m afraid we simply don’t have any names quite yet. But we do have something that might help us get to that point: a video. And I’d like you to watch it. If you’d come with me to the back, I can explain along the way. I promise. And your friend is welcome to come, too.”

Virginia glanced at Emma and then back and forth between the two officers, the one tight-lipped and the other smiling, several times before she finally gave in, bowed her head, and stepped through the opening. Officer Hudson had already turned away, seemingly confident that the women were following him. As they passed the younger, seated man, though, Virginia halted long enough to rest a hand on his shoulder and offer a warm, matronly smile.

“By the way, dear, I *am* terribly sorry about how I acted earlier,” Emma heard her whisper to him. “I suppose I may have – what’s the phrase? Jumped the gun! I think I jumped the gun a little when you told me you didn’t actually know who broke into my

bookstore. I was too harsh on you. But you handled it very well, and I'm sure you'll make a darn good police officer when you grow up."

Emma couldn't recall a time when she'd been prouder of Virginia.

Apology delivered, the pair trotted away, catching up with Officer Hudson as he rounded a corner into a dim hallway. From there he led them through two rooms of ambiguous but faintly menacing purpose and another short hallway, debriefing them as they walked. When they finally reached their room and sat down in front of video monitor on a card table Virginia and Emma knew as much as they were allowed to about the latest development in Agèd Pages case.

According to the officer, a small group of teenagers had broken into several stores off Main Street two nights before, but left each without taking anything or damaging anything besides windows. Since the police were fairly confident they were the same people who'd smashed the window at Agèd Pages, Officer Hudson had decided to show Virginia a video of the juvenile delinquents that had been captured by one of the shops' security cameras.

Virginia had silently shaken her head at Officer Hudson's theory, but she let him play the recording. She and Emma watched intently as five shadowy figures in overly large jackets broke a window on the side of a designer craft supply store and climbed in.

"Here," Hudson said after a few minutes. With a click of a button, he stopped the video on a frame of the smallest member of the group leaping back out onto the street as the others waited. "This is the best shot we have of their faces. Take a good look, Mrs. Garrison, and think real hard. You too, Mrs. Walters. Do you recognize any of these kids?"

But Emma's mouth had just soured as the blood in her heart seemed to congeal, and she didn't want to look. She couldn't even feel her hands or feet any longer. More than anything, she couldn't bear to glance at Virginia.

"I'm not sure," she heard Virginia say slowly. She pulled her coat's sleeves down and collar up, preparing herself for an immediate departure. "I'll have to sleep on it, if that's okay."

"Of course. Whatever you need," the officer replied. He smiled once more, either clueless or indifferent, and reached to shut off the monitor. It went black instantly.

At that, Emma turned and retreated back through the dank hallways and suspiciously barren rooms, back past Officer Peters, back to the civilian side of the counter, and back out the doors of the station and onto the street. She found the sun still shining outdoors, although the color of its light meant something different and more painful to her, now that she'd seen Casey and her friends on that screen.

Chapter Twenty-One

Heather

Shockingly, the extra week of hunting for literary treasure did as little good as the first several had. Indeed, between the rapid arrival and departure of Thanksgiving and the other distractions consuming various members of the group, another fatal Friday materialized before anyone in the Whimsy Ladies Book Society had found Emma's prize.

The sun was presently setting on both the small Mississippi town and the penultimate day of November, muffling the month's second-to-last gasp for life. All five WLBS cohorts had gathered in the cramped Mystery Room of Agèd Pages for a final time, but none of them looked excited or pleased. One by one, the women had trickled in, muttered a greeting with their eyes directed at the floor, and scurried to their usual seats. Each sat in silence, seemingly aware of her own failure and waiting for the others to speak first. Heather, for one, found herself wallowing in the dim glow of a disappointing holiday, as the entire once-lustrous endeavor began to look like a giant waste of time.

It didn't take her long to notice the complex system of averted glances at work among the ladies. Catherine wouldn't look at Emma. Emma wouldn't look at Virginia, and neither would Beth. Virginia wouldn't look at Heather. For once, though, Heather didn't want to be looked at anyway. She'd spent a tense Thanksgiving at home with Christopher the day before, and the stress of their prolonged confinement together had dulled the deep blue of her eyes, left her red curls limp and dry, and rendered her clear pale skin blotchy and pink.

Finally Virginia huffed and leaned forward. Grabbing the edge of the table, she said, “I’m sorry, y’all, but I don’t know what we should do. Not this time. Obviously, our little treasure hunt didn’t turn out as expected, despite our best attempt to too turn things around. We’ve already given ourselves extra time, altered the rules, and none of it made a difference, did it?”

At first, Virginia’s words were met only by the sound of fabric rusting as the rest of the women shifted in their seats and tugged at the hems of their clothing. Then Heather answered with a glum, “Yeah...”

Catherine and Emma both nodded listlessly to second the sentiment, leaving Beth as the only one who didn’t respond at all. Other matters seemed to hold her attention, more than anybody else’s. Noticing this, Heather suddenly experienced a new, unfamiliar fear – fear that Beth’s mood might have something to do with her. That she’d found out one of Heather’s two biggest secrets.

Still no one said anything of substance, until Virginia jumped to her feet and exclaimed, “You know what, y’all? I’m going to go grab some snacks, maybe put together a cheese platter, so everyone has a few minutes to think things over. Is that alright? Great. I’ll be back in a jiff. Y’all won’t even know I’m gone.”

She sang the last two sentences as she heaved her weight up the stairs and into the dim little passageway that she insisted on calling “The *Wormhall* of Science Fiction.” Emma, who had for so long refused to meet Virginia’s eye, unexpectedly sprang up and rushed out of the room after her. The way Emma moved – the sense of purpose and sharpness in her hurried steps – filled Heather with a vague dread that felt strangely premonitory. Heather, Catherine, and Beth listened as Emma caught up to Virginia in the

Non-Fiction Non-Kitchen with their ears unabashedly turned toward the thin wall that separated the two rooms.

“You’re acting weird, and you need to cut it out,” Emma said. She spoke in a frantic, hissed tone that clearly wasn’t intended to travel back to the Mystery Room. It made Heather want to get up and go stop her friend from saying anything more, but she couldn’t. She found herself stuck in her seat, as if under some sort of paralytic enchantment.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Virginia replied. Her words were equally distinguishable. “I am just fine.”

Heather heard Emma’s short, explosive laugh and then: “I’m not fooled, and I’m afraid the others won’t be for long. You’re acting as shifty as... something really shifty that I’m too upset to think of right now. It’s so obvious that you have something on your mind. Your voice is flatter, and you’re walking like a normal person instead of hopping around like a deranged tooth fairy. Even if it’s just because of what happened yesterday, you need to stop, because it’s not just my cover you could blow. No one else can know what you do about you-know-who and you-know-who-number-two, especially not the fiancée, who’s sitting there in your Mystery Room!”

Heather saw Catherine turn to look at Beth, but she refused to do so herself. She continued staring straight ahead at a wall of books.

“You know what, Emma?” Virginia snapped, even louder now. “I’ve had just about enough of this. Heather and David’s secret, Casey’s secret you won’t talk about. It’s all weighing on me, because I actually have a conscience and care about the people in my life. I’m glad to see your mind is still light as a feather, though.”

Then Emma's voice again: "Oh my god, you're going to tell, aren't you? You're planning on telling Beth about Heather and David."

Followed by Virginia's: "No, actually, I'm not planning any such thing. I probably should be. It's probably the right thing to do. But I'm not, because I made a promise, and I'm still well-aware that it's not my decision to make. So, yes, I need a moment to deal with it all, and you need to let me have that. In fact, right now I'm thinking you need to leave this room this second, before I'm compelled to hurt you, because I love this old kitchen, and I don't want your tacky blood getting all over it."

Heather heard the sound of steps, which grew louder until Emma appeared in the doorway of the Mystery Room. Her lips were pursed, and her face paled as she met the three pairs of eyes trained upon her and the shocked silence that had filled the room like cold, dark water in a sunken ship. A moment later, Virginia joined her in the room's entrance with a plastic smile and empty hands.

"Okay, y'all, we're back," Virginia announced cheerfully. "But I'm afraid I couldn't find anything good for us to snack on. I've been doing some thinking, though. I've decided that I just want to do whatever y'all want to do. I mean, the treasure and all that, it's fun, but it doesn't mean as much to me as you four ladies do. You know I love each and every one of y'all."

Heather groaned quietly, but didn't say anything, expecting Beth to verbally or physically attack her at any second. Instead, Catherine fractured the silence by saying, "No you don't, Virginia."

"Excuse me?" Virginia asked, furrowing her brow as four heads swiveled to stare at Catherine. Catherine's declaration had certainly surprised Heather. How was it that,

out of all of them, Catherine was the only one capable of responding with more than a blank, uncomprehending stare? Since Virginia had apparently been aware of certain things, shouldn't Catherine have been the one who knew the least, the one who should have been the most taken aback? Aside from Beth, of course.

“How can you even say that?” Catherine continued. Her voice shook as she spoke, but it also got louder and louder, and she managed to get to her feet, forcing everyone but Virginia to crane their necks as they gawked at her.

“I know for a fact that none of you love each other even a fraction of the amount you claim you do. If you did, you” – here she spun around to point at Heather, waving her finger somewhat blindly in the general direction of red hair – “wouldn't be having some sleazy, dime-store-romance-novel affair with Beth's fiancé, and you two” – she turned back to Virginia now and then Emma – “wouldn't be letting it happen without a word! You can't cover that up and then smile and chitchat and say you're Beth's friends. Beth and I don't even pretend we're close, we both know we don't really have much in common, but I'm still being a better friend to her right now than any of you have ever been. You just can't do something like this! It's not right! I'm sorry.”

Catherine directed the last two broken words of her rant at Beth and then sank all the way back into her chair with her eyes closed. For a moment, everyone stared in shock. Even Catherine, upon wearily reopening her eyes, found great interest in a carpet stain near her left foot. Her outburst hung in the air, batting at heads and arms and legs like vinyl door strips. Had she ever spoken so many words at once? Let alone so passionately?

Finally, after far, far too long, Beth looked at Heather, her eyes already glassy with tears that threatened to leak down her face. “Is that true?” she asked, almost soundlessly.

Then everything erupted.

“Are you trying to destroy me and ruin everything? You were supposed to be my friend, my one ally. Why the hell would you and Virginia talk about me and David *in the next fucking room?*” Heather screamed towards Emma at the same moment Beth began babbling to no one in particular.

“You couldn’t keep one secret from popping out of your big, useless mouth, Virginia? You did this on purpose, didn’t you? You knew they could hear us. You annoying, insignificant garden snake. It’s a miracle you can even stand with string for a spine,” Emma shouted half a second later. Everyone had already sprung to their feet, except for Beth, who was doubled over on the carpet, gasping through her tears.

“What about you, Heather?” Catherine said. “You can’t put this on anyone else. Give me one sane reason for sleeping with David. Are you incapable of even *thinking* about Beth? Or Christopher? Or anyone but yourself?”

“You’re the one who followed me! And how could I have possibly known they could hear us?” Virginia yelled.

“Oh, yeah? And who exactly made you guardian of what’s right?” Heather retorted over all the other screams and accusations that were being hurled. “You just can’t stand that some of us have lives and worth. That just eats an insufferable, wooden prude of puppet up, doesn’t it? You gotta take the real girls down a couple notches ‘cause you know you’ll never be one.”

From there, the situation just dissolved further and further, until Beth leapt up from the human puddle she'd made on the floor when she'd slid out of her seat.

“Stop it!” the newest, youngest member of the WLBS screamed, her hands clenched at her sides and her tangled and unruly like a feral animal's. “Stop it.”

For at least the second time in a single night, the four other women fell silent at once and just stood in their places, gaping at one of their own. Virginia's left cheek was speckled with Emma's saliva, but she didn't move to wipe it away. Catherine was swaying on her feet. No one said anything, even when Beth walked to the door and slipped out without looking back. One by one, the other women gathered their belongings and left.

When it was Heather's turn, she stepped out into the cold air and looked up and down the dark street, wishing this broken, bleeding, sideways town weren't her home. Wishing she hadn't played such a huge role in ruining it.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Beth

As far as Beth was concerned when she stumbled out of Mrs. Garrison's store, the other members of the WLBS could keep their book club, they could keep David, and they could keep Whimsy, Mississippi. She didn't want any of it anymore. In fact, she couldn't even be sure which parts she'd wanted in the first place. After all, she'd moved to Whimsy because *David* thought they needed a fresh start after Canens, and she'd joined the WLBS because *David* wanted her to have friends. And as for David himself – well, wasn't it true that he'd been the first guy whose smile made her feel whole and unscarred to come along since college? What if that was all he'd ever been? All they'd ever been?

Somehow, despite the whirlwind of panic and confusion and denial tearing through Beth's gut, she managed to locate her car (which was parallel-parked in front of the shop next to Agèd Pages), insert the key, and climb inside. The trembling woman even got the engine started and drove three blocks in the wrong direction, nearly blind, before she steered herself onto a sidewalk and slammed to a stop inches away from someone's mailbox.

She knew she couldn't go any farther on her own. Even if she didn't mind injuring herself or wrecking her car, she couldn't take somebody's poor, defenseless mailbox with her the day after Thanksgiving. She just couldn't have that kind of thing on her conscience right now, so after a moment of sitting in stunned, thoughtless silence and another of building up her resolve, she fished her cell phone out from under the

passenger's seat. Then she called the one person in the entire town she could still stand to lay eyes on: Tim.

Since it was past six o'clock at night, and she'd dialed the toy store's line, Beth wasn't really expecting an answer. In truth, she was actually half hoping against one. But Mrs. Garrison's nephew picked up on the third ring and greeted, "Hello! This is Tim at Tim's Toy Store on Main. We're already closed for the night, but I'd love to know how I can help you come morning."

"Hey, Tim," the woman on the other end said. "This is Beth Mueller, and I kinda have a favor I need to ask of you. Do you think you could pick me up and drive me home? Let's just say I've had a rough night, and I have a feeling I'm not going to be able to make it on my own."

"What? My God, of course. Where are you? Are you hurt? Do I need to bring anything?"

For several seconds, all Beth was capable of doing was laughing silently at the concern coloring Tim's gentle voice. Concern. What a funny thing that was, and what great lengths people went to in order to fake it. But did anyone actually ever feel concern for someone else, or was it all just a part of a time-honored practical joke the world played on people like Beth. On idealists and believers. Most importantly, was Tim's concern real? Or was he too in on the so-cruel trick?

As fresh tears wet her eyes, Beth's shoulders finally stopped seizing with what passed for humor, and she twisted in her seat, looking for a street sign. With the night as starless and dark as it was, it took her nearly a minute to make out the white letters.

“I think I’m near the corner of Prospect and Walnut,” she murmured at last.
“Right past Taft Park.”

“Okay. I’ll be there before you know it.”

True to his word, Tim arrived faster than Beth would have thought possible, and without her noticing his approach. At the time, she was preoccupied trying to disentangle the faces flooding her mind, the faces of everyone she knew in Whimsy, which were all running together to create a blurry David/Tim/Chris monster and a hazy Mrs. Garrison/Dr. Anderson/Heather/Catherine/Emma creature. It was a mess and left her so oblivious of the world around her that she didn’t see or hear a thing until Tim knocked on the driver’s side door of her car.

“That’s some pretty creative parking,” he said when she rolled down her window.
“Mind if I ask what the sidewalk did to you?”

After she ran the back of her hand over her face, checking for any residual saltwater, Beth unlocked the door and shimmied over to the passenger side. “Oh, you know. It was there, I was there, so it was bound to betray me eventually. Just thought I’d get the first swing in for once.”

“Makes sense.” Tim swung himself into the empty seat, turned the key to restart the engine, and began backing her Jeep away from the pretty lawns and tasteful houses Beth could have ruined, if she’d only had the heart. With that thought, however, Beth suddenly pictured herself as the Cowardly Lion from *The Wizard of Oz* and shuddered. She couldn’t help it; but if she was the lion, what did that make her new pilot and

companion, Tim? Surely he wouldn't want to be Dorothy. There was no way the slippers would fit.

Lost in her own comedy of horrors as she was, Beth almost didn't notice that the pair stalled at a stop sign almost immediately. When she lifted her head, she found Tim staring back at her patiently.

"What?" she asked groggily.

"I don't know where you live," he said.

"Oh, right. Fulton Avenue, half a block from where it meets Honored Lady Drive. Funnily enough, Honored Lady is the road that connects my block to Heather Hartman's block, you know."

"I think I can find that, and since it's sort of across town, we'll have a bit of time to talk. You want to tell me what's wrong?"

"Not really," Beth replied.

"Alright. You need some space, and I respect that. I promise, you won't hear another peep from me unless you start it."

Beth and Tim thus drove the majority of the sixth of a mile to her house without another word. It wasn't until they actually turned onto Fulton, and Tim slowed to a stop in the middle of the street, uncertain, that Beth turned to face him once again. Then, with an unexpectedly loud, clear voice, she demanded, "Did you know?"

"Know what?" Tim asked as he tried to blink away his confusion.

"Did you know that my fiancé was sleeping with another member of the Whimsy Ladies Book Society? 'Cause, from where I'm sitting, it appears that everyone in the county knew before I did. I mean, as if the betrayal weren't bad enough, every single one

of my so-called friends – Emma, your aunt – they all knew about it and kept their mouths shut, so they could protect perfect Heather Hartman. More like Hartman the Heartless, if you ask me. Hartman the Heartless and David the... God, I don't even want to think about it. All I want to know right now is: did you know too? Did you stare me in the eyes and lie, like everybody else?"

Looking completely stricken, Tim clasped Beth's hand between his own and then pulled her in for as full a hug as the enclosed space would allow. "Oh, no, Beth. No. I didn't know a thing, I swear. But I'm so, so sorry. I can't believe anyone would do this to you. Who on earth would be foolish and cruel enough to break such a big, caring heart? The way that thing's sewn on your sleeve, I spotted it the second you walked into my store, and if you'd been single, if you'd had half a chance to give me, I would have wanted to carry that heart and protect it for the rest of my life."

Beth sniffled in his ear. "You're just saying that because I'm crying, and you're a gentleman," she whispered.

"Maybe I exaggerated a little – but I probably *would* have asked you on a date. Not so dramatically, of course. Just something along the lines of, 'Hey, I think you're pretty cool. Wanna get dinner and a movie?'"

"Well, that's very sweet." Finally, Beth pulled away and took her keys from Tim's palm. She looked up into his face without intending to and felt something like a magnetic draw toward him. She had to glance away before she could resume speaking. "Sweet enough to make me wish I'd met you under different circumstances, and almost sweet enough to make me want to stay in Whimsy and forget everything else. I honestly

don't know if I can stay here, after all this. So before you make it any harder, I need to go inside, talk to David, make some big decisions, and possibly pack up my life."

"Well, then, I guess this might be it," Tim said with a sad shrug. "Goodbye and/or goodnight, Beth Mueller."

"Yes. Goodbye and/or goodnight, Tim..."

"Bale."

"Right." Beth blushed and reached for the door handle, but she didn't pull it until after she'd finished saying, "Goodbye and/or goodnight, Tim Bale. Thanks for being here for me, even though we barely know each other. Thanks for being my only friend in Whimsy, and thanks for giving me a ride. I think you're pretty cool too."

Beth walked up to her porch and let herself into the gray, one-bedroom bungalow she shared with David. He was waiting inside and asked her what was wrong as soon as he saw her tear-streaked face. Then came the inevitable: the accusation and the fight and the break-up, the details of which she'd barely be able to recall later. All she'd really remember was the pain, a sensation like something being physically ripped from her body as she looked on in disbelief. It created an empty jagged hole containing only hopelessness and defeat. Beth was left feeling as if she'd just lost a war she'd been waging for far too long.

In the end, she asked, "Did you ever love me?"

And David said, "Of course I did. So much."

"But you don't anymore," Beth replied through the tears. Her voice cracked, but she didn't let it stop her. "You can't love someone and break them at the same time.

That's not real love. It's something else. So the only question I have left is, 'When did you stop loving me?'"

David shook his head slowly as water filled his own eyes and spilled over, gliding down his face. "I don't know," he said.

Beth turned and fled into their bedroom, where she was greeted by a glut of memories. She bent forward at the waist, so that her feet remained on the ground, but her face and arms and torso rested on the top of the bed. Her sobs shook her whole body back and forth. In a cruel, dark, violent, horrible way, the rocking was reminiscent of the way Beth's body used to move under David's, back in the beginning, when the two of them routinely made love in any position they could think of. The similarity made her all the more aware that she was alone in the room and in her life now, so she turned her head to look at her own right hand, fingers spread and palm flat against the bedspread. It looked so sad and small without David's covering it. So fragile. But it was still there, and it was still hers.

That's what made her decide to stay. That's what made her realize she could leave David and the WLBS without leaving town. That's what made her resolve to stay in Whimsy, Mississippi, not as Beth Mueller: Fiancée of David Rorey Holden and Member of the WLBS, but as Beth Mueller: Person, Veterinary Technician, Lover of Books and Dogs and Dark Blue Cardigans. Beth Mueller. Period. Stop.

The next day, Beth awoke early to search for an apartment. It was last day of November, but by noon, she was able to sign a short-term lease, effective December 1st. The place she found was a small duplex cottage on Almond Avenue, near Catherine's

residence. The pear-colored shutters on each of its large windows looked hopeful to her, and the owner assured her she could have a dog there. So she scribbled her name on all the necessary lines and then drove herself straight to the humane society. There, she marched up to the chipper employee at the front desk, smiled widely, and said, “Hello. I’m here to adopt a little brown dog. You guys call him Canens. I’m ready to take him home with me.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Emma

The Sunday morning following the catastrophic WLBS meeting dawned cold and wet, bringing with it a thick fog that coated the slick streets outside Emma's house and obscured the fiery orb rising over the tree tops in the distance. Even before the residents of Whimsy woke, the humid chill of the day had surrounded their homes, barricaded their windows and doors, and seeped through the smallest of cracks into their bedrooms, where it penetrated their bodies, minds, and bones with an abstract sense of misery and remorse. It was truly the perfect start of the Lord's Day.

As always, Emma rose earlier than any other member of the Walters family on that first December morning. She didn't intend to wake the rest of them and drag them to church, as she usually did on Sundays, however. She was, in fact, planning on skipping church, for the only time anyone in the house would be able to recall. The only one she would rouse would be Casey. Aside from grounding her indefinitely, Emma hadn't actually spoken to her daughter since her trip to the WPD. The pair had pretended to ignore each other throughout Thanksgiving and in the days since, but Emma had decided it was time she put an end to that. She went into Casey's bedroom, flipped on the overhead light, and shook her daughter's shoulder.

"Get up, get dressed, and get in the car. You and I are taking a trip," she said.

Casey sat up slowly and looked at her alarm clock. “Like hell I am.” She let her head fall back down upon her pillow, but her mother grabbed her wrist and yanked her upright. Her eyes widened and focused on Emma.

“I said, ‘Get up, get dressed, get in the car,’” Emma responded in a low, menacing tone.

Casey got up, got dressed, and got in the car. Emma drove her fuming daughter and herself out of town with no explanation, heading for Skunk City. Neither of them said anything until Emma pulled up to a pawn shop on the outer edges of the city.

“Where are we?” Casey asked, as spitefully as she could.

“Never you mind,” Emma said. “Just stay in the car and try not to break any laws while I’m inside. Maybe I’m just old fashioned, but I think you’ve already done enough breaking and entering for a fifteen year old.”

She locked the Odyssey’s doors and entered the pawn shop, but not with her usual purpose. She wouldn’t be scavenging for some underpriced trinket that would do little more than look dignified on her mantle after she lent it a good, fabricated backstory. Not today. She already knew what she wanted today. This time, she would search through this store – and however many other pawn shops, gun stores, and yard sales along the way she had to – until she found some loose antique cartridges, preferably .22s, like the ones she used to help her daddy load into his prized T-Bolt Rifle. Replicas of the ones Maw Maw had confiscated from ten year old Emma only three days after picking up her grandchildren at the Whimsy Police Department and bringing them back to the Skunk Suburb to stay.

Once she found her cartridges, Emma would get back in her minivan and drive to the cemetery on the outskirts of the Skunk Suburb. Along the way, she'd tell Casey her real story. About her mother, who'd married down, had three children, and then killed herself to get away from the good, happy life she'd created and couldn't stand. About her father, who lost custody of his offspring after a certain number of arrests but had already lost interest in them the moment he found his wife's body. About her Maw Maw, who stepped in as both her mother and father and taught her and her brothers important lessons, such as self-loathing, pious condemnation of the weak and downtrodden, coldness, and control.

Emma could see now where that control had landed her. She led a life built on lies, eased her mind by keeping as many other people as possible from living as they wished, and didn't know her own daughter. She'd driven her baby girl from her, as Maw Maw had driven her out of Skunk Suburb, and now Casey was a rabbit's breath away from getting into real trouble. So Emma would use the truth to win her daughter back as they took the cartridges straight to the cemetery and dumped them on Emma's grandmother's grave together. Mother and daughter working as one to overcome the past. They'd just heap the cartridges there, in front of the gravestone, as many as they could carry minus one.

The last one Emma would save for the foot of the grave. She'd shove that one into the dirt, deep into the soil that had grown so dark and rich from decomposition, six feet above Maw Maw's skeletal toes. That last one would stand there, forever upright and alone, like a middle finger being raided by the earth itself.

Then perhaps, on the way home, Emma could begin to teach her daughter how to drive.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Heather

Saturday, Heather had confessed her affair to her husband, and Sunday, Christopher asked her to leave their beautiful house. He wanted time apart, he said. A break, he called it. Time to clear his head. And he'd told her it might be best if she left his company, found another job. She would have thought he added that last part out of spite, if she hadn't had to watch his face crumble between every word. She wanted to reach out, to touch him, to hold his hand or hug him or somehow possess some other part of him once more. But he flinched whenever she spoke, and he drew back every time she moved near, so she kept herself from pressing her fingers to his cheek or her lips to his. Instead, she pulled out a large blue duffel bag, and she packed.

She packed three pencil skirts and their matching blazers, to wear on interviews. She packed her curling iron and her makeup bag. She packed her laptop, laptop charger, and phone charger. Her toothbrush and her shower accessories. A framed picture of her and Chris on their wedding day. A ratty pajama shirt and the baggy gray sweatpants Chris had always said she looked great in. Seven blouses and four pairs of jeans. All her bras. Every pair of bikini-cut panties she owned, but none of her thongs. She packed her old high school yearbooks and her favorite pieces of jewelry. The calligraphy set Chris had given her for her last birthday. Several times, she imagined herself packing Chris himself, throwing him in her duffel bag on top of everything else and taking him with her on this so-called "break." But she didn't.

When she was done, she called an old high school friend for a favor and then drove to the address he'd given her. There she found a large American Craftsman home. She hurried up the walkway to the porch before she could lose her momentum and resign herself to sleeping in her car. Nothing happened for a moment after she knocked. Then a beautiful blond woman with a huge pregnant stomach and her left hand clasped around her toddler's answered the door. Shelley.

"Hey, Shelley," Heather said in her new voice, the one she'd heard herself using ever since she'd told Chris about the affair. It was quieter and more tentative than her old one, and she thought it made her sound like the scared, gawky girl she'd been in middle school. "I know we haven't been close for a while now, but I think my marriage might be over, and I really need a place to stay. Do you have a couch you could spare?"

Epilogue

Whimsy

Throughout the first few weeks of December, as Heather and Beth each moved out of their old homes, and Emma reintroduced herself to her family, most of the members of the WLBS thought their book club would continue on. They told themselves that the Whimsy Ladies Book Society would be okay, that it would resume meeting in a few weeks, perhaps without Beth. They had no way of knowing how wrong they were, of course. None of them would have guessed that November 29th, the night when they were supposed to celebrate the conclusion of their first successful treasure hunt, was going to instead become the last assembly of the WLBS, as well as the last time all of its members would see each other at once.

Following that final blowout, Heather lived with Shelley and the rest of the Hamilton family for a time, until Christopher announced his intention to file for divorce. She left Whimsy and moved out of Mississippi by the time spring arrived. At first, she maintained semi-regular contact with Emma and even Virginia, but after a few years, it dwindled down to Christmas letters and a couple of emails and then eventually nothing. No one in Whimsy knew what happened to her beyond that point.

The others stayed in Whimsy and tried to move on, to make amends for certain things and forget others. Emma shared her story with the rest of her family and resigned from several committee, including the Whimsy School Board. Before she did, though, she called Principal Garcias and every member of the board to recommend Catherine for

the creative writing position. Because of Emma, Catherine began teaching the class in January, at the start of the next semester. Three years later, she published a slim volume of poems, which began with a sonnet about her depressed, overweight, cat (a fictitious creature). Her first book received warm review and an unexpected amount of attention in literary circles. One critic described Catherine's work as "incisive, hysterical meta-poetry at its finest" and "a critique of modern literature that questions conceptions of genius writing and hack writing." So began a long and eclectic publishing career.

As for Beth, she spent that first December settling into her new home and filling her free time with Canens the Second and Tim, who took her on their first date the following April. Beth forgave Virginia for keeping the affair a secret, and the two became friends. Beth stopped calling Virginia "Mrs. Garrison," and Virginia stopped calling Beth "Bethany." Virginia never made up with Emma or ate at the Firefly Café again, however. Agèd Pages itself managed to cling to life for the rest of hers, though it never did garner enough revenue to let her start up a local magazine for book-lovers, as she fantasized about in her later years. She even had a name picked out: *The WhimLit Review*. She died at eighty-seven at home in her bed with her hand in Tim's, and with her last breath, she thanked the Lord Above for an interesting life and said it was time she got to see her Steven again.

Four years after the treasure hunt and the dissolution of the WLBS, lastly, a volunteer at the Whimsy United Methodist Church on Main Street re-catalogued the books in the church's library and discovered one more than expected. She triple-checked the church's records, but found no mention of the narrow, leather-bound copy of *The*

Screwtape Letters by Clive Staples Lewis, so she simply put it back on the shelf. There it stayed, gathering dust for several more years before finally disappearing for good.