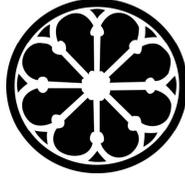


Chapter 1



A Novel Beginning

The gray walls of the lecture hall throbbed with subdued panic as frightened students skidded into their seats and rummaged through their notes. Prof. Garmon Harwood’s English 101 final exam, rumored to be the undoing of countless Stanton-Giles University freshmen, was only minutes away. In my assigned seat in the back of the musty room, I shut out frantic whispers about tenses and participles and brushed my fingers along the edges of the spiral notebook which held the rough draft of my novel. I closed my eyes and pictured my valiant heroine in a large circle of tall black trees.

Gathering up the hem of her cloak, Lyda Rose tried to run, but her shoes sank in the half-frozen mud and hindered her escape. The pounding of her pursuers’ feet was maddening. Why had she ignored Grimwulf’s warning to start home before dark? She reached the cliff’s edge. Intending to leap to the lake below, swim to shore, and hide till morning, she removed her cloak and shoes. As she poised on the edge of the precipice, a strong hand grasped her shoulder from behind. She whirled around and stumbled into the arms of Redthorn the Avenger. He spoke:

“So do you have the notes for the exam? I lost mine.”

The floor of the ancient forest crumbled away and Redthorn slid into the chasm. Lyda Rose faded into the mist. The bandits halted in their tracks and the dark woods fell silent.

I scribbled out “*The lake is frozen, My Lady. You’d be leaping to your death*” and closed the notebook. I reached under my chair for my English 101 notes and handed them to Trevor Rhodes, as I had every class period since September. He leaned over the armrest that separated our lecture hall seats until his strong arm pressed against mine.

Trevorode the Defender

“Thanks, Agnes. You’re the best.”

Get a grip, Agnes, I thought. He doesn’t mean it.

He leaned in closer. He smelled of peppermint and unrealized dreams.

“So, Agnes, can you help me out? What should I study first?”

I was glad to have an excuse to gaze into his eyes. He looked so much like I’d pictured Redthorn the Avenger, I sometimes wondered if I’d coaxed a real person from my imagination.

My stomach fluttered. “Well, do you remember what an objective complement is?”

He gaped at my notes like a starving man at a sandwich. “Isn’t that when you’re saying something nice to someone without getting all emotional about it?”

“Uh, no. That’s different. A complement is—”

“Miss Quinn.” From the front of the lecture hall Dr. Harwood growled.

I looked up. “Sir?”

“If you’re finished talking to—” he lowered his head to examine the seating chart on the lectern—“Mr. Rhodes—perhaps you’ll notice my assistant is passing out the exam.”

“I ... didn’t see you come in.”

He pushed his reading glasses down on his nose and scowled over them. “If you were a little less interested in your neighbor,” he said, “you might have.”

Suppressed laughter rippled across the sea of chairs.

For the briefest moment I hoped Trevor would rise to my defense, but he remained absorbed in his studying. When the assistant arrived at our row in the back of the room, Trevor returned my notes and pulled out the pen I’d loaned him on Wednesday. He passed the exams to me. His hand lingered on mine for a moment. He winked. My heart melted. My pulse raced as I tried to concentrate on the exam.

Once again I was muddled in another ill-fated, one-sided romance—mired in misery I had not invited and did not welcome. My only comfort was I hadn’t brought this sorry state of affairs on myself—fate had thrown Trevor in my path the first day I stepped on campus. I’d replayed the scene in my mind a thousand times, alternately savoring and regretting it. I dropped my new books. Trevor stopped to help. We stooped down, grabbed for papers scooting away in the wind. Our eyes met. I fell in love. Trevor did not.

From the very beginning, I told myself he could never think of me in a romantic way.

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Tall, broad-shouldered, with dark wavy hair, deep brooding eyes, and perfectly formed lips, he resembled a Greek god lately arrived from Olympus. I, tall, asthmatic, freckled, with thick, curly hair and a practical wardrobe, was the sort of awkward girl Charlotte Brontë described as *unprepossessing*. In spite of the fact I'd gotten the braces off my teeth before I came to college, I still couldn't possibly compete with the horde of petite blondes who prowled the campus to snare men like Trevor.

I might have recovered from our first meeting and even managed to forget Trevor if we hadn't ended up in the same English class. Old Dr. Harwood was notorious for adhering to the ancient practice of an alphabetized seating chart. On the first day of class the other students grumbled as they separated from their friends to locate their assigned seats. I rejoiced. This sensible system placed me as a "Q" on Trevor "R's" left for an entire semester of blissful proximity. On the first day of class my heart pounded as I sat down next to him.

"Hello again," I said, almost breathless.

"Do I know you?" he said.

We fell into a curious rhythm as the semester wore away. Every day I headed to class early so I wouldn't miss a single minute with him. Every day he arrived with a different girl in tow. To them he said, "See you after class." To me he said, "Got a pen I can borrow?" Every night as I drifted off to sleep I resolved to be more sensible, but every day I headed to class early. And so it went. In spite of all the stern lectures I gave myself, I never lost hope that one day Trevor would see we were made for each other.

Eventually, fate again took a hand—once our grades began to accumulate. When the midterm exam was returned, Trevor had made yet another D. He wadded up his paper, tossed it on the floor, and then tapped his finger on the A written on mine.

"How do you know so much about this stuff?"

It was the first time he'd asked me a question about myself.

"I've ... always been good at English."

"So you think you could help me out? I've got to make a C to stay eligible."

Our routine changed—well, Trevor's did. Now *he* was arriving early so I could coach him enough to scrape by on tests. When the girls called to him as they walked past us on their way to their seats, Trevor gave them a casual wave and then turned his attention back to me. Those were golden hours when the stale air of the lecture hall seemed filled with spices.

Trevorode the Defender

One day I was bold enough to move our relationship to the next level.

“If you want, I could meet you in the library for a longer tutoring session.”

He looked up from my notes, shook his head, and said, “I don’t think so.”

His snub of my offer puzzled me, but failed to dampen my devotion. As long as he didn’t know a predicate from a preposition, he’d still need me till the semester was over. Test by test, paper by paper, I transported him safely to the final exam, like a soldier bearing a wounded comrade across a minefield.

And now the final exam was in our hands. I could have answered the questions in a few minutes, but since this was the last time I’d see Trevor till January, I dawdled over the pages, pretending to think. When I finished, I turned back to the first page to “review my answers.” Then I gathered up my notes and my novel and peeked at Trevor from the corner of my eye. He was bent over his test, rubbing his forehead and biting his lip. His beautiful black hair had drooped down over one eye.

Without thinking, I reached over and brushed his hair back from his face.

His hand jerked up and knocked mine away. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing. There was a ...”

“Miss Quinn.” Professor Harwood’s voice thundered through the silence. “Is there a problem?”

I broke out in a cold sweat. “No. No, sir.”

“Finished with your exam?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then turn it in and excuse yourself.”

Trevor was still scratching out answers when I left. At semester’s end, he squeaked by with a C- and rewarded my efforts by inviting Wendy Mayfield home for the holidays.

As I drove home alone, my own Ghost of Christmas Present revealed scenes of Trevor and Wendy celebrating. I hovered above, watching them breakfast with Trevor’s family, shop for matching sweaters, pose for photos with a department store Santa, cuddle on Trevor’s living room sofa, drink hot chocolate, and gaze out at falling snow. Mile after weary mile, their love story played out in my mind. Unlike the reformed and jubilant Ebenezer Scrooge, however, I was deflated by my visions.

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My mother, her “Happy Holly Days” apron tied around her red plaid flannel pajamas, had waited up past midnight for me. Her tear-soaked face left a damp stain on my shoulder when she hugged me. The living room pulsed with holiday cheer: the Christmas tree blinked, a warm fire crackled, apple-scented candles glowed. Mom dabbed at her eyes with a candy cane printed napkin and pointed toward the kitchen.

“I have fruitcake—Aunt Minnie sent it.”

“I’m sorry, Mom. I need to go to bed. I have a headache.”

I might as well have knocked over the tree and doused the fire.

“Oh. Well, I understand. You’ve had a long trip.” She took a plastic sandwich bag from the kitchen drawer and tucked the slice of fruitcake inside. “Tomorrow’s another day. We’re having pancakes for breakfast.”

Exhausted, I fell into bed and vowed to be more cheerful for my mother’s sake.

I came down to breakfast the next morning and found my father cutting his pancakes into perfect square bites. I put my arm around his shoulders, kissed him on the cheek, and sat down in my usual place at the table.

He winked at me. “How are ya, kiddo?”

My mother interrupted. “Aggie’s a little tired, Stu.” She slid four steaming pancakes onto a plate and set it in front of me.

Dad passed the syrup. “Grades gonna be okay?”

“Oh, you know, the usual for me. Doing great in English, barely scraping by in biology.” And then without thinking, I blurted out, “I don’t know why I have to take biology anyway. It’s not like it’s going to help me become a better writer.”

Dad looked up at me, his knife and fork hovering in midair. “I thought we settled this last summer before we took you to school. Don’t you remember what I said?”

Mom grabbed the coffeepot and rushed to the table. “Now, Stuart, we can talk about that later. I have leftover meatloaf. Would you like that in a sandwich for your lunch?”

He fixed his eyes on mine. “Just a minute, Betty. I thought I made it clear I’m not paying good money for tuition so my daughter can pursue her hobby.”

Still reeling from Trevor’s rejection, I bristled at my father’s demeaning my chosen profession. I laid down my fork and propped my elbows on the table.

“Hobby?”

Trevorode the Defender

My mother, with four more pancakes rising to golden-brown perfection on the griddle behind her, stared open-mouthed at us, tears glistening and ready to gush.

I remembered my resolve and smiled at her. “Do we have boysenberry syrup?”

She opened the pantry and brought a bottle, still sealed, to the table.

I handed it to my father. “Could you open this for me, Dad?”

He understood my call for a truce. We finished breakfast in silence.

When he left for work, he whispered in my mom’s ear before he kissed her goodbye. I put my plate in the sink and retreated to my room to unpack. I lifted out my folded clothes, laid them on the dresser, and retrieved *Redthorn the Avenger* from the bottom of my suitcase. I sat down on my bed and thumbed through the pages.

Hobby—if only writing were as simple as that. Anyone who has never felt compelled to apply words to paper, never been induced to find a quiet place to sweat out the fever of an ailing plot thread, cannot know what it is to be afflicted with the writing virus. The art is malarial in its tenacity, infectious in its essence. Though my parents and teachers warned me of its contagion, once I saw my first paragraph on the page, I became powerless to stop. I’d drunk from the enchanted chalice of *Writing* and would be forever under its spell.

Mom knocked on my door. “Agnes? Want to do a little Christmas shopping? Emerson’s is having a sale on thermoses.”

I closed the notebook. “Sure. I’ll be ready in a few minutes.”

As we strolled through the stores, Mom peppered me with questions about my teachers and new college friends. When she asked if I had any romantic prospects, I said no.

“Now, don’t worry. Remember, Toby didn’t meet Janette till his senior year and now look how happy they are.”

My brother, Toby, was the quintessential firstborn son. Serious, focused, successful, accomplished, he was everything I was not. Eight years old when I was born, he’d chosen the role of third parent rather than lovable big brother, and tolerated me with bemused benevolence. He was the serious scholar in the family, orator of two valedictorian addresses, and now a tenured high school math teacher in a progressive school district. His wife, Janette, a surgical nurse, had given birth to two sons, the apples of my mother’s eye and the heirs apparent to the Quinn family name.

Toby and his family arrived three days before Christmas. Two-year-old William and baby Lewis were precisely what we all needed. While my parents

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doted on them, they focused less on me, and I was able to slip away to my room to write. Besides that, I wanted to avoid the inevitable family discussion of “how school was going” and had no intention of allowing Toby to interrogate me. He was more prone to lecture than my father was.

When Toby offered to take the family to dinner, I insisted on staying home with the boys. After Lewis went to sleep, William and I had a quiet dinner of macaroni and cheese and nibbled on Christmas cookies. I read “Twas the Night before Christmas” to him, tucked him in bed, and spent the rest of the evening writing. The relentless longing for Trevor had brought out the best in me. I crafted brilliant, complex scenes of the struggle for human existence and the inevitable disappointments of love. Redthorn grew more like Trevor; Lyda Rose, nobler and lovelier.

When I heard the car in the driveway, I turned out my light and hopped into bed. I lay there listening till my family was quiet, wondering if Trevor and Wendy had gotten on each other’s nerves by now and thinking of my next chapter title. When I thought everyone had gone to sleep, I tiptoed to the kitchen, made a cup of tea, and sat down by the Christmas tree.

Toby came downstairs. When he saw me, he paused on his way to the kitchen. “Can I get you anything?”

I held up my cup. “No, thanks. This is fine.”

I hoped he’d go back upstairs to bed, but coffee mug in one hand and fruitcake in the other, he stood in the kitchen doorway.

“We haven’t had much of a chance to catch up, Aggie. How’s college?”

I stared at the seven stockings hung on the mantle. “Fine.”

“Enjoying your classes?”

“Not yet.”

His Puritan forefather tone emerged. “Plan to enjoy them anytime soon?”

“Once I get my requirements out of the way and start taking my writing courses.”

He paused for effect. “You haven’t given up on that yet?”

I turned to him. “No, I haven’t given up on that yet. That’s why I went to Stanton-Giles—to study under Robinson Trask.”

“Who?”

“Robinson Trask, the famous novelist. You’ve never heard of him?”

“No, I guess I don’t read the kinds of books he writes.” He sat down in my dad’s recliner, put his coffee mug on the end table, and picked pineapple out of his fruitcake as he expounded.

Trevorode the Defender

“Look, Aggie. I’ve always thought it was really cute that you want to write. It’s your dream, I get that. But college is the time to start making decisions and figuring things out.”

My voice quivered. “Did you come all this way just to make fun of me?”

“Of course not. We came for Christmas.”

He laughed. I didn’t.

I put my cup on the floor and stood up. “Well, then, Merry Christmas.”

I headed for the stairs. He started after me and grabbed my elbow.

“Wait a minute, Aggie. Let me explain.”

I looked up at him. He wiped my tears with his crumpled napkin. Aunt Minnie’s rum-flavored crumbs stuck to my face.

“Look, I didn’t mean to upset you. You’re my little sister and I love you—you know that. That’s why I’m trying to keep you from making a mistake you’ll always regret. Understand?”

I wanted him to leave me alone, so I nodded.

“Besides that, you’re worrying Mom and Dad, and you don’t want to do that. Now let’s get some sleep. My little guys will be awake before the sun’s up.”

On Christmas Day I played on the floor with William, snuggled with Lewis, thanked my parents for my new coat, ate turkey, green bean casserole, and pecan pie, hoped Trevor hated what Wendy had bought him for Christmas, avoided the subject of college at the dinner table, and spent the afternoon in my room with Redthorn. Toby and his family left the next day. When he hugged me goodbye, he whispered, “Remember what I said.”

On New Year’s Eve, I sat upstairs and listened to my parents and their friends sing “Auld Lang Syne” and marked December 31 off my calendar. I took out my new calendar and gazed at the pristine white numbered squares. So much possibility and potential lay ahead in 1972. This is the year I’ll turn the corner, I thought. I’ll finish my required courses and start working on my major. And who knows? Maybe this is the year Trevor will come to his senses and kick Wendy Mayfield to the curb.

On the first day of Dr. Harwood’s class, I checked the seating chart posted on the back wall. I nearly broke out in hives when I saw Trevor and I were still assigned to the same seats.

I’d been in my chair for ten minutes when Trevor came in with Wendy hanging on his arm. They stood in the aisle and talked till Dr. Harwood entered. Then Wendy headed to her chair, and Trevor slid in next to me. He didn’t even say hello. When class was finished, he waited for Wendy in the aisle. She looked at me and whispered to him. He laughed, and they left the room.

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I waited through January, February, and March for him to ask for a pen. But he never once asked what chapter the quiz was on, or to borrow my notes, and never touched my hand when he passed papers to me. His grades continued to improve. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out Wendy, snobby but smart, was helping him.

After spring break of our freshman year, the news was heralded: Trevor was engaged. Like so many other melancholy authors, I found solace in my work and poured all my grief, angst, and frustration into my writing. In honor of unrealized love, I changed the name of my Saxon hero from Redthorn the Avenger to Trevorode the Defender. The lovely Lyda Rose, a loftier version of me, still appeared as heroine. This wholly irrational obsession comforted me and gave new focus and impetus to my writing.

Trevorode the Defender was my Sistine Chapel ceiling.

The following autumn I secured a spot in Dr. Robinson Trask's Fiction Writing class. I deemed this happy circumstance as a course correction of my universe. Though I'd failed at romance, I'd completed two successful semesters of required courses. I entered Dr. Trask's classroom with the same clear conscience and awestruck silence as a mother superior at vespers. I was going to place myself squarely under the tutelage of the man I most admired and wanted to emulate.

That semester, I wrote as if I had an irrevocable bond to a muse. I fulfilled every assignment with aplomb. I was always included among those who were asked to read their work aloud. It appeared the old days were gone. I, Agnes Quinn, was growing confident, self-assured, and optimistic. When, one day, I read Dr. Trask's comments at the end of an assignment and saw "Brilliant" inscribed in red with the bold stroke of his pen, my heart nearly stopped. But the next sentence—could it be?—was even better: "Please see me in my office tomorrow at 9:30."

I passed a sleepless night in which I played out a variety of scenarios, all starring me in some invaluable role in Robinson Trask's life. I arrived at his office at 9:00. He arrived at 9:29, gave me a quick glance, motioned me toward his door, and offered a perfunctory "Good morning." Seated in his office, he leaned back in his chair, placed the fingertips of both hands together, and glanced briefly at the ceiling.

"I have a great opportunity for you, Miss Quinn. You've heard of Stockton-Trask Publishing?" He asked this as if everyone had naturally done so.

I had not, but dared not appear ill-informed.

Trevorode the Defender

“Of course,” I said. “I seem to remember the name.”

“My brother Ferguson is the ‘Trask’ of that partnership. He’s ... tried his hand at many enterprises and has ... shall we say, *impacted* many of them.”

I wondered why my mentor, famous for his syntax, hesitated over his words.

“Mr. Stockton, my brother’s partner, has demanded—rather, assigned—my brother to develop a new money-making idea. Since I have ... connections, Ferguson turned to me.”

“I ... see,” I said, though I didn’t.

“Your ... style is what Ferguson is looking for. Is it possible you have a longer, more developed story than those you’ve submitted in class ... some idea Ferguson could use?”

I hesitated. Was I ready to allow someone else to enter the sacred world of Trevorode? Was I prepared to hand off my Holy Grail to another’s keeping? Was it time for *that*?

“As a matter of fact,” I said, “I’ve been working on a project for quite a while.”

He brightened.

“It’s about a warrior, a Saxon hero, who—”

He bolted upright in his chair and looked at me with the same hope as a shipwrecked sailor views an approaching sail.

“Excellent! Could it be made into a co ... a continuing story? Something with a sequel? A whole series of stories?”

Sequel? I thought. Series? He has a higher opinion of me than I imagined.

“Yes, I suppose that would be possible. But there’s one thing. I work at Norman’s Grocery Store to help pay my tuition. I don’t think I’ll have time to—”

With a wave of his hand, he dismissed my objections. “No problem. Ferguson wants to offer you a job in his publishing company. When can you meet with him?”

I suggested Monday.

“Good idea,” he said. “Leave a copy of your manuscript with my secretary tomorrow. Once Ferguson reads it, you can meet with him for further instructions.”

When he picked up his phone and began to dial, I realized our interview was concluded.

“Dr. Trask, I want to tell you how much I appreciate this oppor—”

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But he didn't hear a word I said. He spoke into his phone.

"Crawford? Robinson. Tell Ferguson to be in his office on time Monday morning. Call my mother and tell her I took care of everything and she won't be able to reach me for a while."

I don't think he noticed when I left.

The next morning I left the manuscript with his secretary and wrote my two-week notice to the grocery store manager. That weekend, anticipating my new position, I packed a few supplies and mementoes in a box so I'd be ready to move into my new office.

I arrived at Ferguson Trask's office on time.

"Have a seat," he said.

My manuscript, the title page stained where a cup of coffee had sat and spilled, was on his green desk pad.

"I read your piece about Troubadour," he said.

"Trevorode?"

"Whatever—you know, Miss Quan,"—he glanced at the title page—"I really like this 'Destroyer' of yours—"

"Defender."

"Whatever—I've been trying to get ahead in the publishing business for a while now, and it looks like your character—"

"Trevorode."

"Whatever—may be precisely what I'm looking for. I took it home. My son read it—loved when the invader guy got stabbed in the neck. Do you know what he said?"

Afraid to ask, I raised my eyebrows and shook my head.

"He *said* he wished he could get a lunch box with that on it."

Lunch box? What was next?

"Do you have any experience with panels? Robbie didn't say."

"Panels?"

"Yes, and if not, do you have an artist in mind or do we need to find one for you?"

My mind was spinning. What did he mean by "panels"?

"I hadn't thought about illustrations yet," I said. "I assumed a publisher would take care of that. Don't you have an illustrator on staff?"

"No, not yet. This is an entirely new venture for Stockton-Trask. But what with the market being the way it is and the surge in superhero TV shows—"

The interview at last was taking a more predictable turn.

Trevorode the Defender

“I see,” I said. “Yes, I’ve often thought Trevorode was similar to *Beowulf*.”

“Beowulf? Who’s that?”

“Beowulf. The Anglo-Saxon epic. Trevorode has many of the same traits.”

“Have they ever made *that* into a comic book?”

We both sank deeper into our morass of miscommunication.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’m not much of a fan of comic books.”

He squared his shoulders. “Then how, young woman, do you propose to write one?”

“I don’t intend to write one,” I said, and wondered for the first time if Ferguson Trask had been recently released from a mental hospital.

He stood. His bald head reddened.

“I thought Robbie explained. This project is to be the *protobyte* of the new division of Stockton-Trask Publishing.”

“You mean prototype?”

He didn’t hear me. “When it succeeds, I’m going to start my own company, Trask Comics. And you, Miss Quill, are going to be on the cutting edge of that project with me.”

Stunned, I retrieved my sullied manuscript from Ferguson Trask’s cluttered desk.

“The name is *Quinn*, and I wouldn’t let you or your brother near my story if you offered me an office *and* a partnership. Comic book? Are you kidding me?”

He snorted. “Office? Is that what you thought? You were going to work in the copy room and make coffee.”

The last words I heard as I slammed the door behind me were, “I’m telling Robbie!”

That night I tore up the letter to my store manager and unpacked my office supplies.

The next assignment I submitted to Robinson Trask received a B and no comments.

At semester’s end, I packed *Trevorode* away, leaving my Sistine Chapel ceiling unfinished and my dignity intact.

Chapter 2



A Kind Stranger

Trembling, Lyda Rose crossed the threshold of the Great Hall, where Trevorode the Defender held court from a high-backed oaken chair. His scarred, sinewy hands gripped the chair's arms with fearful strength as he leaned forward, looming over the scrawny Sir Traskalot cowering at his feet.

"You've been summoned," Trevorode said, "to answer for your crimes against the fair Lady Lyda Rose of Grimsdale Manor."

The accused could only whimper.

Trevorode's voice thundered: "Speak up. If you fail to explain yourself, you'll be judged unworthy to rule your—"Quinn"—and thus, your—"Quinn"—will be taken from you and—"

"Quinn."

I snapped out of my story and turned to my best friend Xander Plumley, who, unlike me, was a serious scholar and never allowed his mind to wander even during lunch. We'd reached final exam week of our sophomore year, and as usual, Xander was worried I wasn't prepared. While we were freshmen, he'd put up with my daydreaming, but he'd grown less tolerant as our junior year approached. He knew the blank look on my face meant I had withdrawn from the racket of the dining common to ponder my plotline, and he'd called me back.

"Sorry," I said. "As much as I hate to admit it, Ferguson Trask gave me the best idea for my next chapter."

Xander took the pencil from behind his ear and tapped it on the table.

"And have you had the 'best idea' for how you're going to pass your biology exam?"

"I have my book with me," I said.

I unzipped my book bag and displayed the heavy volume. My biology final, less than twenty-four hours away, would conclude my second attempt to pass the course.

"And did you see the registrar about changing your major?" Xander asked.

"Yes. I'll spend all summer compiling bulletin board ideas and reviewing grammar."

"And counting down the days till Trevor's wedding?"

"I'm not sure when it is," I lied.

"Oh, come on—"

He stopped mid-sentence when Jonquil Putnam bumped into the back of my chair. She crooned over my shoulder as condensation from her glass, well-aimed, dripped down my neck.

"Hello, Xander. Ready for exams?" she asked.

"Not yet," Xander said.

"I finished my exams early so I could leave for Europe with my parents," she said. "Would you like to have dinner with us? I'm sure you'd enjoy talking to my stepfather. He's—"

"No, thanks," he said, "I need to study."

"All right," Jonquil said, deflated. "Have a good summer. See you next year."

And with a final drip from her glass and no farewell for me, she was gone. Jonquil Putnam was the great-granddaughter of *the* Putnams of old Carolina antebellum stock. Her family, well-known and "veh-eh-rih" well-respected, had been floating on an ocean of money for decades. She wasn't working *her* way through college by organizing vegetables at the grocery store. But neither, like Xander, was she resting on a stack of academic scholarships. I'd always suspected she'd been admitted to the university through some kind of connection. She was not the brightest star in the academic sky. Pampered and prissy, she'd considered me a boll weevil in her cotton field since the moment we met.

As my being a "Q" had destined Trevor to sit on my left in English 101, Jonquil as a "P-u," was perpetually on my right. Xander, assigned to sit on *her* right, always leaned over her to talk to me. Unaccustomed to being overlooked, Jonquil nurtured a deep and abiding resentment of me. One day she asked me to stay after class.

"This can't go on," she said. "I won't allow it."

Chapter 2 ~ A Kind Stranger

“What?” I asked.

“You—coming between me and Xander.”

“I can’t help where I sit,” I said. “Talk to Dr. Harwood.”

She shook her finger in my face. “You leave him alone. I mean it.”

“I’d never bother Dr. Harwood,” I said. “I’m scared of him.”

“Not Dr. Harwood. Xander.”

“I don’t bother Xander,” I said. “We’re friends.”

“It’s more than that,” she said. “You’re interested in him. Don’t try to deny it.”

Of course, I was “interested” in Xander. He was the most fascinating person I’d ever known. His father, Dr. Rufus Plumley, lectured at scholarly conferences and had two books published by Harvard. Xander’s mother, Clementine, hosted formal teas. Beyond that, Xander was the eldest of triplets, born while their father was completing his doctoral dissertation on John Adams’ presidency. The XYZ Affair of 1798 was the chapter underway when Dr. Plumley had been summoned to the hospital for the birth of his children. Inspired, he’d urged his wife to commemorate the occasion by naming the children Xander, Yolanda, and Zane.

Who wouldn’t be interested in a family like his?

But no matter how much I admired the Plumleys, I could’ve never seen Xander in a romantic light. Devoted to scientific endeavors, he often stayed up all night studying chemistry and went to class the next morning wearing the same rumpled clothes he’d worn the day before.

After Jonquil’s exit, I caught Xander staring at me.

“Seriously, Quinn, don’t you feel better now that Trevor is finally a dead end and you can start focusing on your own goals?”

With a sigh, I shoved the tray aside and leaned back in the green vinyl chair.

“My goals—let’s see. I wanted to write. Now I’m going to teach. I wanted to marry Trevor. He’s going to marry Wendy. I wanted to work with Robinson Trask. He wanted to steal my idea for his idiot brother. Yeah, I feel great.”

He stood and gathered his books. “First,” he said, “Trevor was never going to marry you. Surely you realize that.”

“He might have, if I—”

“Second, Trask hasn’t written a good book in years.”

“You don’t know anything about fiction,” I said. “All you read is—”

“Third, *your* novel is years away from publication.”

“You think I don’t know that?” I said. “I don’t have time to work on—”

He slammed his philosophy book closed and shoved it inside his backpack. “Can’t you see you’re better off today than you were a year ago?” he asked.

“And how is that?”

“Because now you can stop acting out this absurd romantic comedy and decide what to do with *your* life—the life of Agnes Quinn, who’s pretty amazing exactly as she is.”

He slung his heavy book bag over his shoulder with such force he knocked himself off balance and stumbled into the table.

I was speechless. Xander had never talked this way to me before.

He regained his balance. “Instead of obsessing about what’s wrong, you should think of all you’ve got going for you and concentrate on that.”

He started toward the door. I shoved back from the table and grabbed my book bag, but before I could follow him, a hair-netted employee yelled at me from the end of our table.

“Hey, you,” she said. “Clean up your mess.”

By the time I got outside, there was no sign of Xander. I loped toward the science building. Never a graceful runner, I caught my toe in a crack on the sidewalk and splattered on the ground. I scrambled up and hobbled on, relieved to find Xander had slowed to maneuver through the throng of commencement visitors bustling around the bookstore.

“Xander, stop,” I said.

He turned around. “I have to go, Agnes. I’m late for my lab.”

Agnes? When was the last time he’d called me that?

I pushed my way through the crowd and grabbed his sleeve.

“Xander, what’s wrong? I’ve never seen you like this.”

“Can you honestly tell me—*you*, who cannot get through a single day without talking about how in love you are—you have no idea what’s wrong with *me*?”

I let go of his arm. “I don’t know what to say. I had no idea—”

“Of course not. You *talk* about love all the time, but you’ve been looking it right in the face for two years and haven’t recognized it. I have to go. I’m late.”

I watched Xander walk away, visible for a long time, then growing impossibly distant across a thousand miles of tulip-bordered sidewalk.

A familiar voice called my name.

“Agnes.”

Chapter 2 ~ A Kind Stranger

I ignored it.

The voice called again.

Dazed by Xander's confession, I couldn't make myself look back.

The voice persisted. "Agnes, no."

I sat down on a concrete bench and stared at a gum wrapper on the sidewalk.

The voice squealed. "Agnes, come back here."

A warm sprinkle on my left ankle stirred me from my stupor. The relentless honey-sweet whining was the voice of Jonquil Putnam. Her manicured hand scooped up a downy mound of white fur squatting at my feet.

She cooed to the bundle. "Naughty, naughty, to run away."

"Jonquil, darling." Her mother, with a bulging shopping bag, emerged from the bookstore. "Papa will be waiting."

I looked up at Jonquil. "What did you want?"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"You were calling me."

"I wasn't calling you. I was calling my new puppy." She angled the pink-collared poodle to face me. "When Mother asked what we should name her, I naturally thought of 'Agnes.' It's a perfect name for a dog."

And with that final volley, she cruised away in her mother's wake.

Bewildered, I studied the stain on my shoe. How had this day gone so wrong? Only a few hours ago, noble and self-sacrificing, I'd entered the registrar's office to change my major, daring to think everyone would finally be happy with me. Yet here I sat—blighted and unblessed, and all because I'd failed to say "yes" when Xander asked if I felt better.

Yes, I do feel better and, by the way, thank you for being the best friend I've ever had.

But even that would have been wrong, because Xander did not want to be my friend. He was in love with me, and I hadn't seen it.

"Is this seat taken?"

A distinguished elderly gentleman was standing next to me. He wore a yellow sweater over a starched blue-checked shirt. The cuffs of his dark-blue trousers brushed the tops of pristine black wing-tip shoes. He leaned on a dark wood derby cane. Though he was older than my father, I couldn't help thinking he was the handsomest man I'd ever seen.

I blinked up at him. "Sir?"

"May I sit for a while?"

I edged over. He gripped the top of his cane with both hands and began lowering himself to the bench. Perspiration beaded on his forehead beneath the brim of a tweed newsboy cap.

When he winced, I reached for his arm. "Need some help?"

"No, I'm all right."

I ignored his refusal and put my hand under his elbow.

"Very kind of you. The bench was lower than I thought. Do you know if they sell the *Wall Street Journal* in the bookstore?"

"No, but I think they have it in the library."

"Is that far from here?"

I pointed down the sidewalk. "The fourth building on the left."

He looked in the direction I'd indicated. "If it's that far, I'd better catch my breath first." He patted the bench. "I hope you weren't saving this spot for anyone."

"No, I was just sitting here trying to decide what to do next."

He laid his hat next to him. "How admirable."

"Sir?"

"Not many people have the sense to stop and think before they act. If I'd done that when I was your age, I'd have saved myself a lot of heartache."

Embarrassed by his openness, I tried to change the subject.

"Are you here for commencement?" I asked.

"No, I've brought my wife to pick up her daughter, or rather *she's* brought *me*." A hint of bitterness tinged his voice. "I haven't introduced myself. Jameson Bridger."

"Agnes Quinn."

"My apologies for intruding on your thoughts, Agnes. You probably don't get much time alone."

"Oh, I'll have plenty of time alone after the mess I've made of things."

Without warning, tears sprang to my eyes.

Mr. Bridger offered his handkerchief, crisp and white with *JB* monogrammed in navy blue on one corner. "What do you mean?"

I sniffled and wiped my nose. "I've just found out I've spent the last two years of my life being a complete moron, that's all."

"And who told you that?"

"My best friend ... only he wanted me for more than a friend and I didn't see it. I've wasted a lot of time loving the wrong person and trying to write a book. I haven't studied for my biology exam. I'm probably going to fail and then I'll have to take the class *again* in the fall."

Chapter 2 ~ A Kind Stranger

I was near wailing by the time I rambled to a halt.

Mr. Bridger put on his hat and spoke as if conducting a board meeting.

“I was supposed to meet my wife here, but it looks like she’s running late. Do you have time for a walk? I promised the doctor I’d keep up with my exercise on this trip. Hold this?”

He handed me his cane.

I stuffed his handkerchief in the pocket of my book bag. While he placed his hands on the bench and pushed himself up, I turned the cane over and ran my fingers along the smooth finish. The gold band beneath the handle was scratched and dull, but I could still read the inscription.

“*I’m a part of all I’ve met.* That’s a nice thought,” I said.

He took the cane and rubbed his thumb over the band. “Tennyson—my father’s favorite. This is the only keepsake I have of his. Leo didn’t manage to rob me of everything.”

His voice was hollow, as if he were stranded in a desert, inhaling hot, dry air.

“Who’s Leo?” I asked.

He looked as if he’d forgotten I was there. The pallor of grief faded from his face as suddenly as it had appeared. He turned toward the library. For a while we strolled along without talking. Then, in the same distant tone, he spoke again.

“My father died when I was very young. One of his business associates, Leo McBain, pursued my mother and manipulated her into marrying him.”

“Why?”

“He was after my father’s family inheritance—a piece of property Leo could get his hands on only if he married my mother.”

“Your mother didn’t realize what he was doing?”

“She was too pure of heart,” he said, “always believed the best about people.”

Mr. Bridger paused. Leaning on his cane, he labored to breathe.

“Maybe we should go back to the bookstore,” I said.

He held up his hand. “I only need a moment.”

I sensed his embarrassment and tried to fill the awkward silence. “Your mother sounds like a wonderful woman,” I said.

“She was. That’s why she was no match for a man like Leo.”

“Did she love him?”

He looked up. “I’ll never know, but I think she married him only because he played on her sympathies.”

“You mean she felt sorry for him?”

He nodded. “He’d lost his wife and was trying to raise a son and a daughter on his own. He told her if she’d be a mother to his children—”

“He could be a father to you,” I said.

“But he didn’t mean a word of it. He treated me so badly I ran away, but I couldn’t bear to think of my mother being alone, so I came back. That’s when she told me.”

“What?”

“About my father’s property—mine someday, if I could just be patient. Leo never stopped badgering her about making him joint owner, but she always resisted.”

He began to cough violently. He reached into his pants pocket, brought out a small bottle, and held it out to me. I twisted off the cap. He sipped and then bowed his head till the coughing subsided. His eyes red and watering, he looked up.

“Thank you, Agnes. My stepdaughter walks away when I start hacking and spewing.”

I replaced the cap. “I’ll hang on to this till we get to the library, in case you need it again.” I pointed to the doorway of a nearby building. “Want to rest a few minutes?”

We stepped into the lobby, found some comfortable chairs, and sat down.

“Would you like me to call your wife, so she can pick you up?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “You’re the first person I’ve enjoyed talking to since I’ve been here.”

“If you’re sure you’re okay,” I said, “I’d love to hear the rest of your story.”

He leaned back. “The day after I graduated from high school, I moved away and worked all summer to save enough money to start school in the fall.”

“I guess you were glad to get away from Leo.”

“I was, but I hated leaving my mother there with him. My absence took a toll on her—that, plus the constant pressure from Leo.”

“What happened?”

“I’d only been gone a few weeks when I received word she was in the hospital. I rushed back to see her. Leo came into her hospital room and asked to speak to me in the hall.”

“What did he want?”

Chapter 2 ~ A Kind Stranger

“He said it was time I grew up and learned the ways of the world. He asked me to ‘talk some sense into my mother while there was still time.’”

“Standing right outside his wife’s hospital room? That’s what he said?” I asked.

He nodded. “When I asked him what it was about, he said, ‘That property, of course. I’ve never been able to make her see reason. If she doesn’t make me joint owner before she dies ...’”

Mr. Bridger’s face flamed red.

“What did *you* say?” I asked.

“I didn’t say anything. I punched him—knocked him right on the floor.”

“Good for you,” I said. “What happened?”

“Hospital security kicked me out. Leo told them I wasn’t allowed back in. After I left, he wrote to tell me I wasn’t welcome in his home.”

“You never went back?”

He closed his eyes and shook his head. “Let’s go,” he said.

He held out his hand. I helped him up.

When we stepped inside the library, Mr. Bridger took off his hat and leaned over the water fountain for a long drink. I retrieved the daily copy of the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* and guided him to a table by the window. He sank onto a chair.

He whispered. “I’ll be all right now, Agnes. Thank you.”

I set his medicine on the table and whispered back, “I’m going to study for my exam. I have to go upstairs to find a journal article I still haven’t read, but it shouldn’t take long. Then I’ll walk back with you when you’re ready.”

I turned to go, but came back and sat down next to him. “I’m sorry. I know it’s painful for you to talk about your mother, but I have to know. Did you ever get to talk to explain to her what happened?”

“No. She never left the hospital. She passed away within a few weeks,” he said.

“What did you do after that? Start college?”

“No, I kept working. Turned out I had a knack for making money. I became what you might call a ‘self-made man,’ though I don’t care for the title.”

“Did you ever hear from Leo again?”

“Oh, yes. He wrote to tell me my mother was so upset with the way I’d treated him, she signed over the property to him before she died.”

“Did you believe him?”

“No, but I was just a kid and didn’t have the resources or know-how to go after him.”

“You must’ve been heartbroken,” I said.

He patted my hand. “It didn’t matter. My mother and I were both free of him. Before long, I had more money and property than I knew what to do with. I didn’t need more.”

I stood. “I’ll let you read now. I’ll check back in awhile to see if you’re ready to go.”

He called to me as I walked away. I sat down again.

“You’re a good girl, Agnes, and I’m sure you have great things ahead of you.”

“Not many people share that opinion,” I said.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “I know quality when I see it. You remember I said so.”

“Thank you, Mr. Bridger,” I said.

“One more thing.”

“Yes?”

“I don’t know what happened between you and your friend. You may not be able to fix your disagreement, but remember this: Nothing is as important as the people you love. Nothing.”

I started up the stairs. My day gone wrong had righted itself thanks to Jameson Bridger. True, I’d relinquished Trevor, resigned *Trevorode*, and renounced Trask. But none of those things was as important as my friendship with Xander. The one tangible thing I could do to prove I was serious about being a better person and worthy of his love was to pass my biology exam. If I could pull that off, I might yet win back his heart.

I walked upstairs, located my article, and sat down to study the biology notes I’d scrawled during lectures I’d barely understood. Totally absorbed, I only gradually began to realize the library was buzzing with whispered conversation. Visitors on tour, I thought, and kept reading. I didn’t look up till a library assistant tapped me on the shoulder.

“You see some old guy around here anywhere? They’re tearing up the campus looking for him. He has a heart problem, and they’re afraid he’s dead under a bush somewhere.”

My heart stopped. I crammed my book and notes into my bag and rushed back to where I’d left Mr. Bridger. Gathered around his table was a throng of people—uniformed security personnel, the head librarian, a dozen

curious students and—of all people—the president of the university. The nearer I got, the sicker I felt.

“Move back. Give him some air.”

“Papa. Papa, are you all right?”

“If anything has happened to my husband, you’ll have a lawsuit you’ll never be able to settle. I’ll own this school.”

I pushed my way through the crowd and saw Jameson Bridger slumped over the table, where I’d left him. On top of the scattered newspapers, his gray head face down, rested on his folded arms. A paramedic was feeling his pulse. As I moved closer, my breathing grew shallow. Crumpled at the feet of Jameson Bridger, squalling, “Papa, Papa,” was Jonquil Putnam. Xander was kneeling beside her.

I stood soundless, like an escaped prisoner in the woods. Would I be arrested? Sued? Charged with kidnapping? Jonquil’s mother would have no limit to legal resources. If her husband died, because I’d let him walk too far and then left him alone, would I be an accessory to murder? Was I guilty of manslaughter?

Thoughts of genes, cells, DNA, and amino acids shot right out of my mind. I was looking straight in the face of a disaster for which I might be blamed. And yet a new scene seeped into my mind like water trickling through cracks in a dam.

A deathly stillness had descended on the manor. The clang of kettles, prattle of maids, barking of dogs, neighing of horses all ceased, every creature silenced with grief.

The king was dead.

Lyda Rose stood still, the great sword, Bronsling, gripped in her pale white fingers.

Princess Hyacinth shrieked. “You did this. There you stand with the king’s sword dripping with his own blood. There’s but one recourse—death by hanging.”

The queen motioned for a palace guard. “Take her away to await execution.”

“Stop!”

The queen shrieked, “Who said ‘stop?’”

The king lifted his head. “I did.”

Jameson Bridger’s voice cracked like a rifle shot. He pulled his arm from the paramedic’s hand and pushed himself back from the table to face the frenzied crowd.

Trevorode the Defender

“Do stop it, Cornelia. I fell asleep—nothing more. This was the first peaceful moment I’ve had on this trip, and I took advantage of it.” He looked at the university president. “Dr. Whitmire, please accept my apologies.” He addressed the librarian. “I’m sorry I’ve disrupted your workplace. It was not my intention. And as for you, Jonquil, do get up and stop that noise.”

As he caught sight of me at the edge of the crowd, our eyes met for a splendid second. He picked up his hat. “I was tired, that’s all. I’m sorry I caused all this trouble.” He turned to Xander. “Young man, if you’ll be so kind as to help me to our car, I’d appreciate it.”

As the four of them, still trailed by the university entourage, moved toward the door, I heard Mrs. Bridger say to her husband, “If only you’d told us where you were going, we wouldn’t have worried. How did you get all the way over here, anyway?”

“The kindness of a stranger,” Mr. Bridger said.

As they passed by, he didn’t look my way and neither did Xander.

Chapter 3



A Tale of Two Letters

As the crowd dispersed, I crept upstairs to a window on the third floor and watched Jameson Bridger climb into the backseat of his Lincoln Town Car. Having concluded he was neither dying nor impaired, I started back to my dorm. So, I thought, Xander would have dinner with Jonquil after all. Over steak in some ritzy restaurant, Jonquil's mother would quiz Xander about his family. Then over coffee and cheesecake, Mr. Bridger and Xander would discuss the stock market while Mrs. Bridger winked at Jonquil and squeezed her hand under the linen tablecloth. The thought was nauseating.

I was so miserable I might've walked off the campus, never to be heard of again, if it hadn't been for Chester Cranston and a stray cat.

As I passed by a thick clump of holly bushes, I saw Chester, our resident environmental zealot, flat on his stomach, his head and shoulders hidden under the hedge. A paper bag and large cardboard box with holes in the lid sat next to his sparse frame and shoeless feet. Inch by painful inch, he edged forward, coaxing his prey.

"Here, kitty. Ow. Here, kitty. Ow."

"Chester. It's me, Agnes. Do you need some help?"

His voice muffled by the undergrowth, he said, "Agnes, I'm glad it's you. I've been trying for two weeks to catch this cat. Some lowlife has put a cardboard ring around his neck."

"Ring?" I asked.

"Yeah. Ow. You know—like from a roll of duct tape. Must've been on him since he was a kitten. Now it's choking him. If he'd stop biting me, I could pull him out."

I knelt down beside him. "Ever think of using a trap?"

“Trap? That would fly in the face of everything I believe in.”

“But if it’s this hard to grab him, he must not be too bad off,” I said.

“Don’t be absurd. He’s scared. Ow. Of course he’s resisting. If you could come around to the other side and head him off, maybe we could catch him.”

The cat and I both needed distraction. Maybe I could do *one* thing right today. Always at my finest when undertaking a noble cause, I stepped off the sidewalk and circled to the other side of the shrubs. I could dimly make out the white tip of a grey-striped tail, whipping wildly. I knelt down and positioned myself to block the poor beast’s escape. When the victim heard my approach, he lunged toward Chester. Careless of his own welfare, Chester captured the creature in a flurry of gray fur and flailing legs and secured him in the cardboard box.

We carried the cat to my car and arrived at a veterinarian’s within a few minutes. The vet quickly determined the terrified animal would have to be sedated in order to have the cardboard ring removed. Chester spoke up at once.

“Go ahead and neuter him while he’s asleep.” Chester turned to me. “Can you split the cost of this with me, Agnes?”

Because Chester had rescued so many animals he’d qualified for the “multiple pet discount,” the vet assured me it was affordable. After the successful surgery, we left our patient to recover overnight and returned to the car.

“Want to stop and eat on the way back?” Chester asked.

“Sure,” I said. “I could use a good meal.”

I’d always liked Chester. He was a physics major, so he was in Xander’s circle of friends.

“So, Agnes,” he said, his mouth full of salad, “what will you do this summer?”

His tone implied he possessed inside information, but I couldn’t make sense of his grin.

“I’m going home and get a job and take a few summer classes—try to make up some of the credits I’m missing.”

“Missing credits?”

“Yeah, I changed my major to education and now I’m a little behind.”

“That’s great,” he said. “I’ve always thought you were a born teacher.”

I looked up from my lettuce. “Why would you say that?”

“Ever since you did that speech on Harry Truman last year—I remember thinking you’d make a good teacher. I read a whole book about Truman on account of you.”

Chapter 3 ~ A Tale of Two Letters

I'd never once imagined myself as a teacher.

"So when are you going to Xander's house?" he asked.

"Xander's house? What are you talking about?"

"Oh, come on. You don't have to play dumb. He told me once you finally wised up about Trevor, he was going to tell you he loved you and invite you to meet his family."

If I hadn't been sitting down, I'd have fainted.

"You knew?" I asked.

"Everybody in the science building knew. He was going to tell you today. Did he?"

"Not exactly," I said. "Something came up."

"Oh. I hope I didn't spoil the surprise. He's been planning it a long time."

"No worries," I said. "I'll act surprised when the time comes."

"That's a relief." He paused. "Could I ask you a favor?"

"Sure," I said.

"It's about Saturn."

"Saturn?"

"The cat. I thought I'd name him Saturn on account of the ring around his neck."

"Saturn. Clever," I said.

"I can't take him home. I'm spending the summer in the Amazon rainforest."

"You were going to keep him?" I thought the cat's next move would be to a shelter.

"No one's going to adopt a cat that age," he said. "One of us has to keep him."

"You don't think—no—I told you I'll be working this summer and going to school. I don't have time for a cat."

"Couldn't your mom take care of him? I thought you said she loved animals."

"She does, but the last time she brought home a mangy dog, my dad put his foot down."

"But this is a cat, and he's perfectly healthy. Come on. What could I do to make this an offer you can't refuse?"

My good deed had nudged fate in my direction.

"How much do you remember about Biology 101?" I asked.

"Everything," he said.

“Could you help me study tonight?”

“I don’t know. My quantum mechanics final is tomorrow and—”

“Those are the terms. Help me pass that exam, and Saturn will be settled in a new home within seventy-two hours.”

With Chester’s expert tutoring I managed to pull off a healthy 78 on my biology exam. Not only did I avoid repeating the course, but I was confident my resourcefulness and initiative would turn Xander’s heart back toward mine.

I called to tell my mother the story of Saturn’s rescue and got the expected reaction.

She sniffled. “The poor thing. Who would do such a thing? Is he going to be all right?”

“Yes, Mom, he’s fine. We even had him neutered while he was asleep.”

“Where is he now?”

“Still at the vet’s,” I said. “That’s why I’m calling. May I bring him home with me?”

Since she hadn’t had a pet in years, she agreed. I’d let her worry about Dad’s reaction.

I’d covered all the bases. Saturn was recovering. I’d passed biology. Chester, though disappointed with a 98 on his own exam, deemed his sacrifice noble. Fired with new optimism, I began packing to go home. Every time I left the dorm, I carried my biology exam with me. How was I to know when I might bump into Xander again? Maybe the encounter with Jonquil’s family had not gone well after all. Maybe he found her mother irritating. Maybe Jonquil was getting on his nerves.

But Xander was nowhere to be found, and I heard nothing from him.

On commencement day my hopes revived. He wouldn’t miss celebrating with his graduating chemistry buddies. As I stood at the edge of the crowd, I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“You’re Agnes Quinn, aren’t you?” asked one of the graduates.

“Yes.”

“Xander Plumley asked me to give this to you. He said I’d find you here.”

I took the letter. “Thanks. Is he all right? He’s not sick or anything?”

“No. He’s gone.”

I hurried to the first solitary place I could find and tore open the envelope. Inside was a single page of yellow legal paper scrawled over with Xander’s half-printed, half-cursive script.

Chapter 3 ~ A Tale of Two Letters

Dear Agnes,

Sorry I didn't say goodbye. Mr. Bridger said he could tell I'm the sort of man he's been looking for and he offered me a job after I graduate. He recommended I finish my studies in Scotland. I went straight home after exams to get ready. This is the chance I've been hoping for, Quinn. I didn't know it would come this soon. Maybe you were right all along—it's better to dream big.

Your friend,

Xander

I sat there reading and rereading the letter that explained everything and yet said nothing. Didn't have time to say goodbye? Scotland? How can you make a decision like that in a few days? Would he work for Mr. Bridger? Was that one of the perks of being his ... son-in-law? Big chance? Dream big? Who wrote this letter, anyway? Not the guy who told me I needed to *stop* dreaming.

Only my promise to pick up Saturn before the vet's office closed stirred me from my stupor and sent me on my way. When I arrived, the assistant lifted Saturn from his cage and handed him across the counter. The cat nestled his head in my arm and purred. I tucked him into a carrier in the backseat and headed out of town.

"Well, Saturn, it looks like it's me and you against the world. Our pal Chester's off to save the rainforest, and Xander is off to—"

I couldn't bring myself to say more, not even to a cat.

When we arrived at home, my tireless mother hugged me and scooped up Saturn. After she pointed out the litter box in the laundry room, she carted Saturn upstairs to my room, where his new bed, treats, toys, and scratching post awaited his arrival. Exhausted from the drive, the day, the week, the year, my life, I didn't feel like talking or unpacking. The one thing I did before I fell into bed was to take Xander's letter from my purse, read it once more, and place it, unfolded, face up on the corner of my desk.

The next morning I stunned my father by coming downstairs before sunrise to have breakfast with him. When I asked if there were any summer jobs available at his company, he almost choked on his coffee.

"I'll see what I can do, if that's what you want," he said. "The last time I offered you a job, you said you wouldn't do 'menial' labor."

"That was the old Agnes, Dad."

He filled his travel mug with the last of the coffee from the pot.

"I'll talk to the boss and call you at noon," he said.

“Won’t be here—I’m enrolling in some summer classes and buying my books today.”

Lunchbox in hand, he opened the back door. “More writing?”

“Nope—all done with that. I’m going to be a teacher.”

I’d never seen my father at a loss for words. After a couple moments he said, “That’s good news. I’ll call you later.”

Mom kissed me on the cheek after he left. “You’ve made your father very happy.”

Under the table Saturn lay on my foot and purred.

At last, all was right in the world of Agnes Quinn.

Dad got me a job as a courier. I’d lived in the same town my whole life, so I never lost my way and had no trouble completing my assignments. I began evening classes at the community college and found the education track wasn’t as bad as I’d imagined. One course, “Drama in Literature,” required me to participate in a production of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Though I auditioned well, the director explained I was too tall for the romantic female lead. He offered me the role of Mother Superior in the final act and made me his assistant.

True to form, I developed a terrific crush on the lead actor, a gorgeous, curly-haired, deep-voiced guy named Thomas Fox. But every night, when I got home from rehearsal, the sight of Xander’s letter would remind me to live a serious and purposeful life. I was neither disillusioned nor broken-hearted when Thomas fell for the girl who played Roxanne.

The director’s praise for me was never-ending. He appreciated my help with line rehearsals and the actors’ interpretation of their characters. On closing night as the cast bowed to a standing ovation, the director summoned me to the stage and presented me with a dozen red roses. He spoke above the applause: “After you graduate, you’ll have a job here if you want one.” The cast members gave me an autographed copy of the program. When I arrived at home, still glowing with memories of the evening, I placed the program on top of Xander’s letter.

I was making progress.

For my class on “Teaching Poetry,” I constructed a unit on William Blake. During the required oral presentation, I quoted “The Tyger” and “The Lamb” with such passion I received not only an A, but applause from the class. I took the comment sheet home and placed it on top of the autographed copy of the program on top of Xander’s letter. Other commendations followed, including a job offer from my dad’s boss for the

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next summer and a Good Citizen citation from the city fire department for my heroism in helping the victims of a traffic accident.

I didn't add a single word to *Trevorode the Defender*.

At summer's end I left Saturn with my doting mother and returned to school for my junior year. Nothing, including me, was the same. Trevor was married, gaining weight, and working at an auto parts store. Dr. Trask was on sabbatical. I was glad I'd never run into him, even by accident. Jonquil was also absent. Having located a suitable candidate for marriage, I assumed she no longer found a university career necessary and was probably preparing for her wedding. Even Chester had written to say he'd secured a grant to stay in the rainforest until December.

For the first half of the semester I tried to find out where Xander was. Because he had a short friends list, and they all judged me to be the cause of his leaving, they wouldn't answer my questions. Left to my own devices, I scanned science journals, checked chemistry conference listings, and even glanced at society columns to see if Jonquil's wedding had been announced, all to no avail. After awhile, looking for Xander took more time than I cared to spend. He hadn't bothered to contact me. Why should I pursue a friendship he wanted no part of?

Only two reminders of the previous year remained—Xander's letter and *Trevorode the Defender*. With a mortician's grim respect, I secured the manuscript in a blue three-ring binder, taped a note card with the title on the front cover, and buried the project in a drawer. Convinced Xander's letter had inspired my success, I was less willing to squirrel it away. The page, however—unfolded, refolded—needed preserving. So, handling the yellow paper like a delicate blossom, I sealed the letter in an envelope and pressed it between the pages of *Classics of Western Literature*.

With only my textbooks and my resolve to keep me company, I became a scholar.

Two years later I graduated with honors.

I took Xander's letter with me to commencement. Walking down the aisle to "Pomp and Circumstance," I remembered the graduation ceremony years before when a stranger had handed me this letter—this letter which had jolted me into reality and set me on a sane and responsible course. Moments before I turned into my assigned row, I spotted Trevor Rhodes, dressed in dark-blue pants and a white uniform shirt. "T. Rhodes" was inscribed on a patch over his pocket. Next to him, Mrs. Wendy Rhodes, cute and petite no longer, was in the full bloom of expectant motherhood.

Things had ended well.

After the ceremony, my parents hosted a graduation dinner in my honor. Mr. and Mrs. Norman, my longtime employers, joined us. As he was leaving, Mr. Norman said, “I hate to lose you, Agnes. If I let you hang your diploma on the storeroom wall, would you stay here and work for us a little longer?”

“I’d like that,” I said.

“What do you mean, Aggie?” my father asked. “Aren’t you coming home?”

“Only for the summer,” I said. “I’ve been accepted into graduate school.” Even my brother Toby was stunned into silence.

I bowed out of summer theatre in favor of devoting time to my master’s thesis—*Unlikely Heroines: A Critical Comparison of Lizzie Hexam and Molly Gibson*. The next spring, after I submitted my thesis, I was completing my application to Brighton Park Community College when I looked up and saw *Classics of Western Literature* on my shelf. I opened the book and pulled out Xander’s letter.

What would he think of me now?

With M.A. after my name, I resigned from my job at Norman’s grocery store and journeyed home for my final summer as a courier. I declined a job offer from both my father’s boss and my former director, assuaging the latter’s disappointment by agreeing to play Henry Higgins’ mother in the summer production of *Pygmalion*. By the end of August, I was out of school, out of debt, single-minded, successful, packed up, and prepared to make my way in the world. Three weeks before the fall term I left home with my parents’ blessing and moved to Plainfield, North Carolina.

When I arrived at my new apartment, a cozy one-bedroom nook on the first floor of a dingy white Spanish stucco building, I put out a welcome mat and placed Xander’s letter ceremonially on the corner of my new desk.

“Welcome home, Agnes,” I said.

On Monday afternoon, the first day of new teacher orientation, my mother called for an update. Before she hung up, she said, “There’s a letter here for you, forwarded from Stanton-Giles. Do you want me to open it, in case it’s important?”

I poured food into Saturn’s dish. “Is there a return address?” I asked.

“Someone named Plumley. Was that one of your professors?”

Saturn ran from the shower of cat food as his dish clattered to the floor. I could hardly breathe. “Plumley?”

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“Dr. and Mrs. Rufus Plumley,” she said.

Xander’s parents. I knew at once something was wrong.

My mother promised to forward the letter the next day. Convinced the approaching letter brought bad news, I thought of nothing else. The training sessions to which I’d given such careful attention now seemed endless and unnecessary. My passion for my new job evaporated.

The letter arrived on Friday afternoon.

Dear Miss Quinn,

Please excuse my writing without a proper introduction, but Xander has spoken of you so often, I feel I know you.

I don’t know if you’ve heard, but Xander has been in trouble because of that Putnam girl. He’s left his work at the university and has all but disappeared. We know he backpacked across Europe for a while, but the last postcard we had was from Australia.

You can imagine how glad I was when he asked me to contact you. If anyone can talk him into coming home, you can.

Please call me at your earliest convenience, so when we hear from him again, I can tell him I found you and you still think of him ... if you do.

*With kind regards,
Clementine Plumley*

The next morning I dialed the unlisted number she’d included at the end of her letter.

“Plumley residence.”

“Hello,” I said. “My name is Agnes Quinn. Mrs. Plum—”

“One moment, please. She’s been expecting your call.”

A receiver clicked. Had she taken the call in the library?

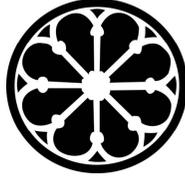
“Agnes?” Her voice was trembling and breathless.

“Yes. Is this Mrs. Plumley?”

“Oh, Agnes ...” she sobbed, “I’m glad it’s you.”

The last time I’d heard those words was when Chester needed my help with a rescue.

Chapter 4



A Brief Encounter

“I’ll help if I can,” I said. “Why don’t you start at the beginning and tell me—”

Mrs. Plumley raised her voice. “I’ll have to check my list and get back to you later.”

“Your list?”

“Who is that?” a voice in the background said.

“The caterer,” Mrs. Plumley said.

“I’ll ask you again,” the voice said. “To whom are you speaking?”

Mrs. Plumley wilted. “One of Xander’s friends.”

“We agreed not to discuss this with anyone,” the voice said.

“I only thought—” Mrs. Plumley said.

He snatched the phone. “Who is this?” he said to me.

“Agnes Quinn. Is this Dr. Plumley?”

“It is. This is a not a convenient time for you to call. My wife is not herself.”

“She asked me to call,” I said, irritated by his tone. “Is Xander all right?”

“No, I’m afraid he is not, and it’s been very difficult on all of us. I’ll say goodbye now.”

“Is there a more convenient time when—?”

The receiver clicked in my ear.

Dumbfounded, I stared at the receiver. I’d been mistaken about the Plumleys. They were not remarkable at all. Mrs. Plumley was as pitiful as any other worried mother, and Dr. Plumley was just plain rude.

“And don’t even get me started on Xander,” I said to Saturn, who, impatient for dinner, brushed against my leg. I grabbed two cans from the

cabinet—one of chicken soup and one of cat food. I filled Saturn’s dish and then complained to him as I swirled the noodles in a pan.

“For years,” I said, “I haven’t taken a step without wondering what Xander would think of me, and now he’s off touring the world while I’m stuck in a community college.”

Occupied with his tuna, Saturn ignored me.

When I sat down to supper, someone knocked at the door.

I stood at the door and called out. “Who is it?”

“Your neighbor,” a man said. “Warner Bingham.”

I remembered his name from the mailboxes.

Brought up to be a good neighbor, I opened the door.

Warner scraped his thick-soled black boots on my welcome mat. Saturn, fearing the intruder, skittered behind the sofa where I wished I could follow. Outfitted in black jeans and a black leather jacket, Warner did nothing to put me at ease.

He held out a blue plastic measuring cup. “Honey.”

I stepped back. “I’m sorry ... what?”

“I need honey.”

“I have apricot preserves,” I said. “That’s about it.”

His face turned as red as the bandana on his head. “Not for toast—for a cough.”

“I see. I have cough syrup.”

He narrowed his eyes. “It will have to do. Go get it.”

I was afraid to turn my back to Warner, but more afraid to refuse him. I rifled through the kitchen cabinet and produced a half-empty bottle of cherry-flavored cough syrup my mother had insisted I bring.

He held the bottle up to the light. “I hope it’s enough, or she’ll keep me awake all night.”

“Your wife?” I asked, hoping he was not in charge of a sick child.

“No, my mother.”

He left without saying thank you or goodbye. I made sure the door was locked, and returned to my lukewarm soup.

Exhausted, I went to bed early, but couldn’t fall asleep. Every time I drifted off, images of the sinister Warner or weeping Mrs. Plumley jolted me awake. The next day I tried several times to call Mrs. Plumley, but could never get past the maid. I tried to keep busy by reviewing my lectures for the first day of class, but couldn’t concentrate. When I learned from the evening news that a thunderstorm was approaching, I went to bed in a worse state of

mind than the evening before. A clap of thunder rattled my building around midnight.

When I opened the door for a closer look at the storm, Saturn bolted out into the pouring rain. Since the day Chester and I had rescued him, I'd never let Saturn outside.

How would he find his way home?

Hoping for some sound from Saturn, I lay awake most of the night. He didn't reappear. On Monday morning, still worn out, I dressed, packed my lunch, and organized my book bag. Out of habit, I reached for Xander's letter, which I'd always taken with me on the first day of any new undertaking. I held the envelope for a moment, then opened the desk drawer, threw it in on top of *Trevorode the Defender*, and slammed the drawer shut.

Instead I took Mrs. Plumley's letter with me.

I called for Saturn as I opened my car door and looked in the rearview mirror one last time as I drove toward the Drifters' Rest. Housed on the first floor of a restored brown-brick, two-story house, the restaurant, owned by Muriel Porter, was well-known for serving the "best coffee in town."

"Good morning," Muriel said. "Have a seat. You look all done in. Coffee?"

"Yes, and keep it coming. This is a beautiful place. How long have you been here?"

She laughed. "Almost as long as the house itself. I inherited it from my great-grandmother, Emmaline. That's her over there on the wall."

I glanced at the portrait smiling down on all who entered.

"The city council wanted to turn the place into a museum," she said, "but I couldn't bear the thought of dirt and smudges everywhere, so I opened this place and moved in upstairs."

"I'm glad you did," I said. "This really is the best coffee I've ever had."

Shored up by caffeine, I summoned my will and drove to Brighton Park Community College. On the way, I urged myself to stop worrying about Xander and my cat and to focus on the job I'd been hired to do. I commended myself for how hard I'd worked to get to where I was. I reminded myself I'd signed a contract and had an obligation to fulfill. By the time I drove into the parking lot, my rhetoric had convinced me. My common sense had calmed me. I was ready to meet any challenge.

And my good intentions might have actually paid off—if only faculty orientation had not left out one unwritten rule: *No one ever parks in Jonas Grinstead's spot*. Had it not been for this fateful omission in my training, I

might never have intersected with the reclusive Dr. Grinstead, who had mastered the art of being virtually invisible among the other eighty-seven professors. Out of dozens of empty spaces, I somehow managed to pull into the place where he had parked every day for thirty years.

Predictability and destiny seldom walk hand-in-hand.

When the rusty white pickup pulled in next to me, I assumed it was part of the maintenance fleet. No one but a first-year teacher or a janitor, I reasoned, would be so zealous about putting the best foot forward. Occupied with my books and file folders, I didn't look up till I heard a tap at my car window. Dr. Grinstead's frayed khaki pants and white shirt, perfectly starched and creased, did little to alert me to his true identity. A good wife ironed those clothes, I thought as I rolled down the window.

"Good morning," I said.

"You're new here, aren't you?" he asked.

His face was as unreadable as the fading logo on his truck door.

"Yes. First day."

"That explains it. Look, Miss, it will take awhile before you become acquainted with our patterns around here, and you're not to be faulted if you didn't realize ..."

"Oh, I see. Have I blocked you from making a delivery?"

"In a manner of speaking. I'm here to deliver knowledge to the unlearned."

I chuckled. "I don't think it's quite that simple."

"Young woman, I know they don't cover anything useful in faculty orientation, but everyone knows this is my parking place."

"I didn't know reserved parking was available," I said.

I reached into the backseat for my umbrella. Though the sun had risen, dark clouds, lingering from the night before, hung low in the sky.

"It's not, but I'm used to having things a certain way."

"Your way, you mean?" My conscience cringed about my poor manners. I ignored it.

"No, I wouldn't put it that way," he said. "But I've been here a long time, and I have no intention of altering my habits for a newcomer."

"Look, Mr.—"

"Grinstead and it's 'Dr.'"

"Look, Dr. Grinstead, you may not have asked yourself why I'm here at this ridiculous hour, so I'll explain." A convenient clap of thunder punctuated my outburst. "I got some bad news on Friday." I glanced at the

letter which lay on the seat beside me. “I didn’t sleep well last night, so I stopped on my way here for coffee.” I held up the cup labeled Drifters’ Rest. “I was feeling better when I pulled into this parking lot—” I looked at my watch—“twelve short minutes ago. But you, sir, have undone all my efforts to regroup.”

I threw my car into reverse, backed up a few feet, and angled into the spot next to the one I was vacating. I slammed the car into park and turned off the engine.

“Better?” I asked.

Jonas met my tirade with unexpected composure, rendering my childish triumph hollow. He bowed his head and exhaled, his silence stunning me. Large, languid raindrops descended, awaking in me the settled conviction that he was in reality a kindly wizard, deploying a seldom summoned power.

After a moment, he lifted his eyes to meet mine. “You must excuse me,” he said in a low voice. “I’ve never been good at first impressions.”

“I liked you better when I thought you were the janitor,” I said.

“He has much better manners than I.”

Jonas took an old black umbrella from his truck.

“Manners can be learned,” I said.

“Yes, they can,” he said.

He shouldered an olive green backpack, tattered perhaps by many a hike through the woods, and walked away without looking back.

Still, soft, silent, the rain fell as I watched Jonas, otherworldly, pace off purposeful steps, still visible far away, behind a silver silk curtain of tumbling water flowing and spilling over red brick walls, coarse gray pavement, and golden-yellow trees, on his way to—what had he said?—deliver knowledge to the unlearned.

I stared vacantly at the water cascading over my windshield. My attempt at an impressive first day at my new job had been thoroughly upended.

“Your first class is still ninety minutes away—review your lectures,” my father would sermonize.

“Don’t get your new shoes wet,” my mother would admonish.

“Snap out of it, Aggie,” my brother Toby would chide. “The old guy didn’t make it rain. Don’t be silly.”

And so, bowing to the voices of reason in my mind, I sat.

I retrieved the bagel I’d intended as a midmorning snack and surveyed my surroundings. As I sipped coffee, I took note of a lone weed growing through a crack in the sidewalk. Then I looked at the offensive vehicle parked

two spaces away. What was the big deal about that place? Maybe Dr. Grinstead was obsessive, afraid of germs and scratches. No. The truck was decades old, dented, and weathered. He couldn't be worried about the paint. I looked closer. That door had been through its fair share of—and then I took a second look at the logo.

Through the dense rain, I could make out pale gray lines, which skipped and blanked out like a connect-the-dots puzzle in a coloring book. The drawing was so eroded it took several minutes to conclude these traces had once been the picture of a tree. As the rain dwindled into a shower, I noticed faint flecks of green and yellow speckling the imperceptible branches. Flowers, I supposed. I had the strangest notion if Jonas could drive this truck out of the parking lot and into the past, these remnants of color would swirl, surge, and shape themselves into blooms again.

Waiting for the storm to subside, I reached several conclusions. First, there was some reason Jonas Grinstead was so rigid and controlled. Second, I'd been rude and thoughtless to a man whose age and experience warranted my respect. Third, I knew how school life played out. I was not going to be known as "the new teacher who yelled at Dr. Grinstead." I emerged from my car a much wiser woman and determined that the day, begun badly, had to be redeemed. A standard letter of apology was my first attempt at reconciliation.

Between morning classes, I scribbled out a note:

Dear Dr. Grinstead,

Please accept my apology for my rude behavior this morning. As I mentioned, I was very nervous about my first day on the job, and my frustrations got the best of me. Ordinarily, I'm easy to get along with or so I've been told. I was wondering if maybe we could start over.

Sincerely,

Agnes Quinn

I quizzed each of my classes about who might be going in the direction of Dr. Grinstead's classroom and found a student willing to deliver my message. Satisfied, I settled down at my desk to eat lunch and read. Within minutes a different student returned with my note. At the bottom in a small, scrawled script were the words: *Good fences make good neighbors. JG*

Furious, I wadded up the paper and tossed it in the trashcan. Unbidden scenes of revenge played out in my mind. I'd report him to an administrator. No, I'd write the college accrediting agency. No, I'd write a letter to the United States Department of Education. Who did he think he was—refusing the courteous request of a colleague? As the afternoon dragged on, I

alternated from feeling like a naughty schoolchild, to a victim, to an avenging angel.

Determined to have the final word with Jonas, I stayed after my last class. On the back of the crumpled paper I'd retrieved from the trash, I wrote: *To err is human; to forgive divine*. I headed to the parking lot, pleased to find Jonas' truck still there and untended. I looked over my shoulder to be sure I was unobserved and approached the truck. Like an assassin drawing a silenced gun, I pulled the note from my pocket and lifted the windshield wiper to secure the message. There on the front seat was a bag from the Drifters' Rest.

Maybe bribery was a better option. I holstered my note and drove home.

Saturn was waiting for me in the driveway. There he sat, meowing as if he'd never been away. He pawed at the door while I fumbled with the lock. Tired from an honest day's work and eager to wake early for my visit to the coffee shop, I sank into a dreamless sleep with Saturn, cleaned, brushed, and fed, snuggled up and purring by my side.

When I arrived at the Drifters' Rest, Muriel set a cup of coffee on the counter before I could sit down. She slid a cinnamon-raisin bagel toward me.

"How was the first day of school?"

"Not bad. I got along great with the students, but I got off on the wrong foot with one of the teachers. In fact, I thought I might pick up a little something extra as a peace offering."

"What happened?"

"You won't believe it. I drove into the wrong parking place."

"Let me guess—Dr. Grinstead's?"

I spluttered, spraying crumbs. "How did you know?"

"Jonas has come by here every day since I opened this place." She took a French onion bagel from a basket on the shelf behind her. "In fact, if you wait another twenty minutes, he'll walk right through that door." She handed me the bag she'd filled. "Or you can hurry and get to school before he does. Make him a present of this, and he'll be your friend forever."

"Onion? You can't be serious. No one eats onion bagels for breakfast."

"No. He brings his own pastrami from home and makes the same sandwich every day. Insists on freshness—buys only one." She pointed to a shelf lined with small jars. "Take a little of that hot mustard to go with it. You'll win him over on the spot." She laughed. "I'll tell him I ran out of onion. Then you can step in and be the heroine."

I imagined the scene and broke out in a cold sweat. “He’ll think I bought the last one,” I said.

“Then tell him the truth,” she said.

“I tried that yesterday.”

“Try again. He’s not at all what he seems.”

Who was I to argue with Muriel Porter?

I scooped up my own breakfast along with the makings of Jonas’ lunch and was out the door and on the campus before he arrived. We both left the distasteful parking place empty between us as we had the day before. Before he had time to turn off his engine, I was out of my car. Offering in hand, I approached.

“Dr. Grinstead.”

By the time I reached him, his door was open. He had one foot on the pavement. “Yes?”

“I stopped by Drifters’ Rest on the way. Everything looked so good I got a little carried away. I have this extra bagel. I wonder if you’d like to have it.”

He appeared to ignore me as he exited his truck and stepped onto the sidewalk. But as I held out the bag to him, he paused, like a deer sensing a hunter in the woods.

“I don’t think I’d be interested,” he said. “I like only one flavor, and she was out of it this morning.” Faint recognition flickered in his eyes.

“If you’re not hungry now,” I said, “you could always save it for lunch.”

He took the bag and looked inside.

“Mustard, too. It seems I’m the victim of a conspiracy.”

“Muriel said it would work,” I said. “Do you really want to go back there tomorrow and tell her she was wrong?”

“No. Muriel believes herself to be the sum of all wisdom. Thank you—”

“Agnes.”

“Thank you, Agnes.” He turned to go.

Without thinking, I blurted out, “Jonas.”

He stopped and looked back.

“The logo on your truck—what does it mean?”

“It’s the place I built,” he said, “and abandoned.”

And with that impromptu confession, he walked away.

I was all but whistling a happy tune when I wandered into the English Department office later that morning to check my mailbox. I felt a sharp rap on my shoulder and turned to find a brittle-faced woman, primly dressed in a

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floral skirt and pearl-buttoned, peach-colored sweater, dyed-to-match peach-colored shoes, sprayed-stiff short blonde hair, and red-framed glasses.

"Excuse me," she said.

"Yes?"

"We haven't met. I'm Beatrix Thorpe."

"Agnes Quinn." I extended my hand, which she ignored. "Beatrice ..."

"No," she said. "Trix. Trix."

"Like the cereal?"

"No. Like the author. Beatrix Potter."

"Oh, Peter Rabbit."

She bristled. "Among others."

I had no idea how I'd gotten off on the wrong foot with this woman, but had no intention of allowing her to dampen my happy mood.

"I noticed," she said, "you stopped to talk to Jonas—Dr. Grinstead—this morning."

"Yes." I thumbed through my mail and hoped she would go away.

"And you gave him a gift of some sort?"

I felt as if I'd been called in from recess for throwing a rock at a classmate.

"You were watching?" I asked.

She reddened. "I was getting out of my car and happened to be looking that way."

"Yes?" I matched her tone icicle for icicle.

"I think you should be informed that Dr. Grinstead and I have an arrangement."

"Arrangement?"

Her friend, who had been looking on from a nearby table, stood and walked toward me.

"Let me help, Trixie," she said. "Young lady—"

I looked down on a short, lanky, gray-haired woman who seemed to be all elbows and knees. Her nose, beak-like, straddled pale, thin lips. Dressed in jeans shortened and hemmed by hand, and a royal blue jacket, she stared up at me like a fierce old bird of prey. I could have knocked her from her perch with one well-placed shove to her bony shoulder.

"You are?" I asked.

"Mavis Applewhite. Miss Quinn, I don't know how the faculty at your other school treated each other, but here at B-P-C-C, we—"

"Have a certain pecking order," I said.

“Have a certain code of conduct.”

“Like chivalry?” I asked.

“That’s for men,” she said.

“The women don’t have a code of conduct?” I asked.

“We—” With a sweep of her hand she indicated Beatrix, herself, and their silent partner at the table, “—have an established way of doing things. Certain situations are taken for granted and one of those is that Jonas Grinstead and Mrs. Thorpe are ... I think your generation would call it ‘an item.’ So we’ll thank you to keep your feminine wiles in check when you have contact with him.”

This scene was too luscious to be believed. After all my years of being too tall, too plain, too loud, too silly to be considered dating material for desirable eligible men, at last—without even meaning to—I had become The Other Woman. Now I had two transgressions to my credit: I’d violated a sacred parking place *and* flirted with the off-limits man. I restrained the urge to laugh and squared my shoulders as I addressed my accusers.

“In the first place,” I said, “if she’s ‘Mrs.’ Thorpe, why is she pursuing Dr. Grinstead, who is, by the way, old enough to be my father? In the second place, the last time I checked, I believe the Constitution guarantees freedom of speech—even here. In the third place, you can put your spying skills to better use than watching me. I live a thoroughly pedestrian life. In the fourth place, I have far worse problems than concerning myself with what you and your tribe consider aggressive behavior. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a class to teach.”

I marched from the room. What had come over me? My whole life I’d bowed to the voices of authority, and now I was behaving like a raving lunatic. Poor Jonas, I thought, no wonder he’s so guarded. If he’s been dodging this bunch all these years, what a wretched life he must lead. Now I knew I’d been mistaken in at least one notion about Jonas Grinstead. His creases and starches were not evidence of a loving wife.

I was only a few steps down the hall when the office door swung open and another voice, almost whispering, called my name. I turned to find Mavis’ and Trixie’s silent friend tiptoeing after me. Her forehead wrinkled, her eyes darting, she urged my silence by holding her finger to pursed lips.

“Miss Quinn,” she said in a low voice, as if warning a murderer was lurking around the next corner, “please excuse my friends. They tend to be a little ... territorial.”

“Territorial—that puts a nice spin on it.”

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“May I walk with you?” She looked over her shoulder.

Her gentle nature calmed me. “Yes, of course. I behaved badly. I shouldn’t have—”

She shook her head. “You’re not entirely to blame. For all their flaws, Trixie and Mavis are longtime friends, and I don’t want you to get the wrong idea about them.”

“And you are ...”

“Elinor Parfrey. Librarian.”

I wondered why such a mild-mannered person surrounded herself with spiteful friends.

“You mustn’t think ill of Trixie,” she said.

“As in Potter.”

She smiled. “Yes, not ‘as in cereal.’ I did enjoy that. At any rate, I’ve long since given up trying to reason with those two. They should’ve retired years ago, but teaching is all they know.”

“That and Dr. Grinstead.”

She nodded. “Trixie went through a nasty divorce last year, and Jonas is the only eligible man in her age bracket. She fixated on him as her best option.”

“Is he aware of her interest?” I asked.

“I couldn’t say. He’s always behaved as the sole resident of his own world.”

We arrived at my classroom. “Why does Trixie keep waiting?” I asked.

“Dreams die hard. Anyway, I’m sorry you received such a poor welcome.”

As Elinor and I stood at my door, I noticed a man in a wrinkled blue suit staring at us from the end of the hall. I thought at first he might be another teacher, waiting to talk to Elinor, but when she walked past him on her way to the library, he only nodded. I realized he was staring at *me*. I shut the door and began my class. All during my lecture I half-expected him to interrupt. I couldn’t shake the persistent feeling of dread that he’d be waiting for me when the hour was over.

There was no sign of him when I left the room or for the rest of the day. But I still ended my last class five minutes early so I could pack my books and lose myself in the horde of retreating students. Keys in hand, I hurried to my car, telling myself I was being ridiculous, but I was glad to see my car’s white vinyl top come into view and rushed over to put the key in the door.

Someone stepped beside me.

Trevorode the Defender

“Excuse me.”

Terrified, I turned to face the mysterious man.

“May I help you?” I looked at him and pretended confidence.

“Name’s Brooker. I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

I stepped back and prepared to run. “May I see some identification?”

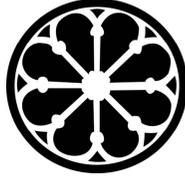
“Sure.” He held out a business card.

I took it. “What’s this about?”

“That.”

With his left thumb he pointed over his shoulder at Jonas Grinstead’s truck.

Chapter 5



A Crippled Rider

I read Mr. Brooker's card aloud: "Brooker's Blades: We Sharpen and Repair Chainsaws."

Brooker grabbed the card from my hand.

"Sorry. That's my brother, Castor. I try to help him when I can, so I carry his card, too." He retrieved his own card from the inside pocket of his soiled suit coat and held it out.

I suspended the wrinkled card by the corner. "Wilkie Brooker Investigations," I said.

"So?" he said. "What about the guy who owns that truck?"

I returned his card. "I only started working here yesterday," I said. "I hardly know him."

"Don't play games with me," he said. "I saw you talking to him this morning."

"Even if you did, I still wouldn't discuss his business with you—not without asking him."

Brooker stood his ground. "Grinstead is part-owner of some property. The other owner died. The family wants to find out if your boy will sell his share. That's all."

"My boy?"

"Don't get bent out of shape. It's only an expression. Will you ask Grinstead to call me?" He held out his card on his open palm.

Once again, I lifted the card by the corner, then tossed it onto the floorboard of my car.

"All right," I said. "Now, if you're not out of here in five minutes, I'll call the police."

“You watch too many movies,” he said.

No prisoner who’d had his life sentence commuted could have been as relieved as I was to drive away from Brighton Park that afternoon. None of my college courses had groomed me for what I’d faced on the job. No one had mentioned the lists of unwritten rules you must figure out as you go along. No one had warned me about the variety of soap opera plots which play out every day in offices, hallways, and classrooms. In short, I was woefully unprepared for daily life in this twilight zone of a community college.

What had I gotten myself into? And how could I get out of it?

As I was unlocking my apartment door, the phone rang. Brooker, I thought. I picked up the receiver. “Yes?”

“Agnes?” my mother said. “What’s wrong? You don’t sound like yourself.”

I put down the groceries I’d brought in. “Sorry. I thought it might be someone else.”

“Someone you’re mad at?”

“Yeah, a private investigator stopped me as I was leaving school today to ask me about another teacher.”

I knew it was a mistake as soon as I’d said the words. In my mother’s mind, serial killers lurked around every corner. She’d be horrified a strange man had approached me.

“Stu! Stu!” she called. “Come to the phone.”

“Please don’t tell—” I said.

“What is it?” my father asked her.

“Some stranger bothered Agnes after school. Here—talk to her.”

“Agnes?” he said. “Do I need to come up there?”

“No, Dad. It’s nothing.” I filled Saturn’s empty bowl.

“Tell me what happened.”

“A man stopped me after school. He asked me about another teacher, who owns some property or something. I didn’t talk to him.”

“Good. You should report him to the administration in the morning.”

“Okay, Dad.” I intended to tell no one except Jonas.

“So, how were the first two days?”

“I didn’t get off to a good start. I’m not sure this is the right place for me.”

“You can’t judge a place after two days,” he said. “If I’d quit every job I didn’t like, you and your brother wouldn’t have had a roof over your heads.”

Chapter 5 ~ A Crippled Rider

“I know.” I opened a can of tomato soup. “I’m simply saying I don’t feel like I belong here. Haven’t you ever had a bad feeling about a place?”

“Nope. And even if I did, I’d keep it to myself. You can’t live your life on feelings. Give yourself some time. You’ll start to fit in.”

Fit in? With Trixie and Mavis? I pictured myself decades from now, scolding some wide-eyed teacher as I glared over my bifocals. *Young woman, we have a certain way of doing things around here.* Nothing—not Ferguson Trask, not Rufus Plumley, not Wilkie Brooker—ever paralyzed me to the core like that vision.

There had to be other perfectly ordinary teachers I hadn’t met yet. Why hadn’t I run into one of *them* on the first day of school?

Why had I parked in Jonas Grinstead’s place?

If I hadn’t parked there, I wouldn’t have bought him a bagel.

If I hadn’t bought the bagel, Trixie Thorpe wouldn’t have seen me talking to him. I might have become her protégé rather than a rival.

If I hadn’t bought the bagel, Wilkie Brooker wouldn’t be stalking me.

For the third night in a row, I lay awake till almost dawn. When at three forty-five I decided I’d stared enough at the ceiling, I sat up and leaned against the pillows. I might as well get dressed and go to the Drifters’ Rest on the way to school, I thought. Muriel had told me what to do about Jonas. It stood to reason she could advise me about Brooker. If I arrived when she opened, I’d have a few minutes with her before the other customers started showing up.

The next thing I remember was blinking at the clock after dawn. I threw on some clothes, sped to the Drifters’ Rest, and rushed into the shop. Behind the counter Muriel was polishing coffee mugs with a clean white cloth. I climbed up on a stool.

“Don’t tell me you were awake again last night,” she said. “You’ve got to relax.”

I accepted the bagel she slid toward me.

“It’s not the teachers I’m worried about now,” I said. “I’m being followed.”

She poured steaming coffee into a white ceramic mug.

“Followed? That’s not likely, is it?”

“It’s because of Jonas.”

“Morning, Jim,” she called to a tall young man in sweatpants and a t-shirt. “Have a nice run? No cherry turnovers today—only apple.” She turned back to me. “Jonas again? What now? Did you tussle with some of his lady friends?”

“Yeah. Trixie Thorpe. But that’s not why I’m here.”

“Oh, no wonder you’re rattled. Beatrice Thorpe is a tiger.”

I stirred half-and-half into my coffee. “Trix—Beatrix—like the author.”

Muriel exploded with laughter. “Yeah, I know. She gave me the same lecture when I first met her. Don’t worry about her. Morning, Colonel,” she called to a square-shouldered man with a cane.

Curious at Muriel’s greeting, I turned to look. Middle-aged, with ramrod posture and a stiff crew cut, the colonel appeared rugged and fit except for a pronounced limp. Over his left eye a jagged scar coursed down his cheek and looped under his jaw. On his right eye was a black patch. He saluted.

“Colonel?” I asked.

She lowered her voice. “Retired military.” She took a cup from the shelf behind her. “His rank means a lot to him. He was in bad shape when he came back from Korea. Wife left him—took the kids. His worst scars are on the inside. How many eggs today, Colonel?” she called.

He held up two fingers as he walked toward the table in the farthest corner of the room. He placed the handle of his cane over the back of the chair beside him and eased himself into a seat. He ducked his head, glanced from side to side, and then leaned back, folded his hands in his lap, and looked over at his hostess.

Muriel pushed open the swinging door that led to the kitchen and called to the cook. “Annabelle, two eggs over easy for the colonel, and don’t burn the toast.”

She winked and nodded at the colonel. He removed the napkin wrapped around his silverware and placed the knife and spoon on his right and the fork on his left, leaving room for the expected plate. Then he shoved the glass bud vase holding three white daisies to the corner of the table and slid the salt and pepper shakers to the center.

Muriel whispered. “She’s never once burned the toast, but if I don’t say that before I bring his coffee to the table, he’ll ask me to tell her. It saves a step.”

Muriel delivered the colonel’s coffee, made one more circuit of the room, and returned to the counter. “Now, where were we?”

“You were going to tell me what to do about Brooker.”

“Who?”

“Brooker. The private investigator asking about Jonas.”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

I raised my voice. “I know. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you.”

Chapter 5 ~ A Crippled Rider

My few hours of sleep had done nothing to improve my state of mind. From the corner of my eye, I saw the colonel push back from the table and angle his chair in our direction.

Muriel wiped the counter. “Okay, start from the beginning. Who’s Brooker?”

“Yesterday afternoon,” I said, “I was standing in the hallway talking to Elinor when—”

“Wait a minute, dear.” She leaned her head to one side so she could see around me. “Good morning, Mrs. Hart. Table’s all set up. Other ladies aren’t here yet. I’ll bring your tea.”

She turned back to me. “Now, you were asking about Trixie, and I told you not to worry.”

“No, I wasn’t. We were past that. I was asking about Brooker.”

“The private eye,” she said.

“Yes, I saw him when I was standing in the hallway and then he followed me to—”

She held up her hand. “Wait a second. Morning, Joe.” She greeted the mailman, who had entered with his Drifters’ Rest thermal mug in hand. “Making another pot of dark roast. Sorry you’ll have to wait. Have a donut on the house.”

I looked at my watch as Muriel refilled my cup.

“Sorry, where were we?” she asked.

“After school yesterday, Brooker followed me to my car and—”

A teacher I recognized from school slid onto the stool beside me and bumped my elbow, sloshing coffee on the counter. He grabbed Muriel’s arm.

“Muriel, please, *please* tell me you found a folder. If it’s not here, I—”

The colonel reached for his cane.

Muriel pulled a folder from beneath the counter and handed it to the frantic professor. “Waffles this morning, or want to try the special?”

“Just coffee. Thanks, Muriel. You’re a lifesaver.” He hurried to a table.

The colonel approached the counter. “Muriel, was that man bothering you?”

“No, not at all. He left something here last night and was worried he’d lost it.”

He indicated me with his thumb. “And her? It seems she’s taking a lot of your time.”

The heat rose in my face as I whirled to face him. “Excuse me?”

Muriel laid her hand on mine. "It's all right, Agnes. Everything's fine, Colonel. She needs some information, and I'm too busy to help at the moment."

He turned to me. "Come earlier, before Muriel's so busy."

"I tried to come earlier," I said.

He ignored me and peered at Muriel. "If you need anything, you know where I am."

"Yes, I do," Muriel said. "You'd better sit down. Your order's almost ready."

"He acts like he owns the place," I said after he returned to his chair.

"It's not that," Muriel said. "I was there when he needed a friend, and he feels he owes me. Now, where were we? Trixie Thorpe. Take my word for it. She has no chance with Jonas. There will never be but one woman for him."

"I didn't come here to talk about Trixie. I wanted to ask—wait ... what woman?"

"That's too long a story to tell right now. You should have come earlier—"

"I know ... before you got busy. I tried, but I haven't slept in several days and I—"

"Excuse me, Agnes." She looked past me again. "I'll take this tray to Mrs. Hart and then I can give you five minutes. But the colonel's right. If you need to talk, you'll have to come back early tomorrow or late this afternoon." She laid four spoons on the serving tray and nodded toward the elderly Mrs. Hart. "She and her friends play bridge here every Wednesday. They bring a tablecloth with them. Isn't that sweet?"

I had no choice but to wait. After all the trouble I'd gone to, I wasn't going away empty-handed. I sneaked another look at the colonel and tried to imagine him young and happy, with a family around him. I studied the professor poring over the contents of the indispensable folder. I saw the mailman tighten the cap on his mug and shoulder his bag of letters. I tried to see in them what Muriel saw—people who needed more from her than simply a cup of coffee and a muffin.

She stepped back behind the counter. "You're smiling," she said.

"I feel safe here."

"Precisely the atmosphere I try to create. Now, about this Brooker fellow?"

I looked at my watch. "I have to go. I'll come back tomorrow."

I laid five dollars on the counter and started for the door.

Chapter 5 ~ A Crippled Rider

Muriel stepped from behind the counter and called to me. “Could you come back later this afternoon?”

My hand on the doorknob, I shook my head and gave a hasty wave in reply.

A husky voice shouted from across the room, “The lady asked you a question!”

An object whooshed past my head. I dodged it, but stumbled over an umbrella stand and slammed head first into the door. The last thing I remember was a scream from Mrs. Hart’s bridge table and Muriel shouting, “Colonel. Sit down.”

I woke up in a pale-green room. Afternoon sunlight filtered through white venetian blinds. On a gray metal table next to my bed, a yellow plastic pitcher, water drops dripping down its sides, sat next to a black phone and a box of tissues. A nurse in a stiff white cap and starched white dress squeezed my wrist in her hand.

“You hit your head pretty hard,” she said. “You were unconscious long enough that the doctor wants to keep you overnight for observation.”

I grasped very little of what she said, but had enough presence of mind to realize I was seeing her out of only one eye. Alarmed, I reached up to find the left side of my face enclosed in a thick bandage.

I gasped. “My eye.”

“Your eye was not hurt. We made sure. Now get some rest.”

Thanks to painkillers and exhaustion, I sank into a deep, satisfying nap. A nurse, who introduced herself as Dolley, woke me. Without asking, she raised the head of my bed.

“Time for dinner.”

“I can’t eat. I’m too dizzy. I’m going to throw up.”

“That’s because you’ve had a lot of medication and no food. Come on now. Sit up.”

She gave me no choice. She put one arm behind my shoulders, the other under my elbow, and tugged till I yielded.

The room spun out of control. I gripped the sheets. “I’m going to fall off the bed.”

“No, you’re not. Close your eyes for a minute. You’ll adjust.”

“I only have one eye to close.”

She patted my shoulder. “Then close that one and relax. Here’s your dinner.”

An orderly placed a tray of food in front of me and turned to Dolley. “Should I leave a tray for the new patient? Judy’s bringing her down the hall now.”

“No, she won’t be able to eat for a while.”

Dolley held open the door as the orderly left. Another appeared, backing into the room, guiding a heavy gurney with painstaking slowness. Halfway through the door, the patient wailed.

“Stop. Stop. My leg. Don’t hit my leg.”

A firm voice spoke from the hallway. “It’s all right, Mrs. Gilbey. Relax. There’s plenty of room on both sides. You won’t hit your leg.”

The orderly cleared the door and turned left toward the empty bed. Mrs. Gilbey’s long silver hair draped across the pillow and spilled over her sturdy shoulders. She held a swollen hand to the side of her bruised face.

“Can somebody please get the sawdust out of my eye?”

The nurse entered. “There’s no sawdust in your eye. It only feels that way. Can you give us some help, Dolley?”

The retinue halted in front of me as the nurse named Judy prepared Mrs. Gilbey’s bed. I pretended to examine the green beans on my tray while I peeked at my roommate. On top of her ample stomach rested a yellow cowboy hat. *Geneva* was stamped in bold ornate letters on a broad brown leather band at the base of the brim.

When all was ready, the orderlies steered Mrs. Gilbey alongside her bed.

Judy addressed her squadron. “All right—on three. One. Two. Three.”

The assistants heaved. The gurney squeaked. The patient groaned. We were all relieved when Geneva Gilbey came to rest on the creaking bed.

“My leg.”

Out of breath, Dolley patted a perspiring orderly on the back as they left the room.

Judy followed and called over her shoulder, “All right, Mrs. Gilbey, rest easy. I’ll get you something for the pain.”

I was left alone with Mrs. Gilbey. While I ate chocolate pudding, she began to sing.

“As I walked out in the streets of Laredo—”

Her voice was a rich, lilting melancholy alto so sweet it almost brought me to tears.

“Come sit down beside me and hear my sad story—”

Judy returned. “Okay, here you go.” She filled a glass with water and lifted her patient’s head. “Two of these and you’ll be feeling better in no time.”

Mrs. Gilbey lay back again.

The nurse reached for the cowboy hat, saying, “Why don’t you let me hang this up for you?”

Mrs. Gilbey released her grip on the hat and brushed tears from her face. “Is my nephew still out there?” she asked.

“No. He said he’d see you in the morning.”

“I wanted to ask him about Buttercup.”

“Buttercup?”

“My horse. She didn’t mean to throw me. She must have stumbled over something. Can you find out if she’s all right? I won’t be able to sleep till I know.”

Judy drew the curtain between our beds.

“Don’t worry about that, dear. You’ll be asleep in no time. Take my word for it.”

Judy stopped by my bed to pick up the dinner tray. She pointed in the direction of Geneva’s bed, put her hands together, and laid her face on them to pantomime sleeping. Then she turned out the overhead light and closed the door.

Geneva sang: “Go fetch me some water—a cool cup of water.”

I lay back on the flimsy pillow and reflected on my predicament. I wasn’t supposed to be in the hospital. One week ago today, I had been taking notes as administrators lectured me on policies and procedures. I had smiled and nodded as they lauded the nobility of my vocation. I had been poised on the precipice of a successful career. But instead of leaping into the white rapids of higher education, I had nose-dived into a bucket of water and ended up in a hospital room with a woman singing cowboy songs.

Mrs. Gilbey’s voice softened. Maybe the nurse was right—she’d soon be asleep, and I could get some rest, too. It had been days since I’d slept more than a few hours at a time. But now I was in a hospital, a place of healing, a place to improve and get well. Medical professionals were right outside my door. Best of all, security guards were stationed in the parking lot and lobby. I was safe at last from Wilkie Brooker and the colonel.

“For I’m a young cowboy and I know I’ve done wrong.”

I closed my eye and imagined Geneva and me sitting around a campfire with the other cowpokes, eating beans from a cast-iron kettle and drinking coffee from a dented tin pot.

“You look mighty rough there, little lady,” Slim the cook would say.

“I ain’t no lady,” I’d reply. “I’ll have you know I survived a cattle stampede today.”

I hadn’t been asleep long before Geneva started snoring. Once I was awake, there was no ignoring her. She made enough racket to loosen the light bulbs from their sockets. I thought of calling the nurse, but what would I say? The poor woman wasn’t keeping me awake on purpose. I couldn’t ask to be moved. I didn’t know how I was going to pay for all this in the first place, much less upgrade to a private room.

Maybe I could ask them to knock me out, too. The pills had worked wonders for Geneva. I was struggling up on one elbow to reach the call button, when the door opened.

“I was about to call you,” I said. “I was wondering if—”

Even in the dim light and with only one good eye, I could tell it wasn’t the nurse.

The colonel held a finger to his lips, urging me to be quiet. He didn’t need to bother. I was speechless.

He closed the door. “Don’t be afraid. I’m not going to hurt you.”

I eased my hand toward the bedside table to reach for anything I might throw at him. “How did you get in here?” I asked.

“A buddy of mine works security—he let me in. I told him I had to talk to you.”

“I have nothing to say.” I was terrified I’d upset him again.

He walked toward my bed as he spoke. “I wanted to tell you I’m sorry and—”

I closed my fingers around the handle of the water pitcher. It wasn’t very heavy, but maybe I could surprise him.

“You’re sorry. Okay.”

“No, you don’t understand. The police will be here tomorrow. I’m sure of it. The last time this happened, they said they’d give me one more chance and—”

I lifted the pitcher.

“—they’d send me back to the VA hospital. I can’t go there. I have to stay here. If my wife comes back, she won’t know where to find me.”

He was standing at the foot of my bed.

“Oh. My leg. My leg.”

Geneva Gilbey was awake. The colonel bolted for the door.

Dolley was in my room in an instant. She made sure I wasn’t hurt and then apologized again and again. “I don’t know how he managed to get in here.”

Chapter 5 ~ A Crippled Rider

“A buddy of his works security,” I said.

Dolley charged out the door. I had a feeling the colonel’s accomplice would be out of a job by the end of the day.

Geneva groaned. “Nurse ... nurse.”

I sat up. “She’s gone. Want me to call her for you?”

“Yes, please. My leg hurts.”

I pressed the call button. A nurse returned with Geneva’s pills.

After the light was out and the door closed, I once again lay awake with little hope I’d sleep the rest of the night.

Geneva whispered. “Excuse me.”

“Yes.”

“I wondered if you were still awake.”

“Yes. Is there something you need?”

She hesitated. “I was hoping we could pull back this curtain between us. I don’t want to bother you, but I’d feel less alone—if you wouldn’t mind.”

“Not at all.”

Since Geneva had spared me another incident with the colonel, I felt I owed her.

I dangled my legs off the bed, slid my feet to the floor, and leaned against the side till the dizziness passed. Then I shuffled over to the chair by Geneva’s bed and sat down.

She reached out her swollen hand and laid it in mine. The palm of her hand was as rough as my father’s.

“I’m Geneva Gilbey.”

“Agnes Quinn.”

“Why are you in here?” she asked.

“I made someone mad.”

She winced with pain. “I can’t imagine that. You seem like such a nice person.”

“I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. You broke your leg in a riding accident?”

“Afraid so. I still can’t believe I did it. I used to fall all the time, but lately the saddle felt more natural to me than sitting in a chair.”

“When did you learn to ride?”

“Four years ago.”

She must be getting drowsy, I thought. She meant forty.

“When?” I asked.

“Four years ago.”

“But you must have been—”

“Fifty-six.”

“You took up horseback riding at fifty-six? Why?”

Geneva told me her story. She had grown up in Chicago, a city kid, the third child of six. Her parents supported their brood by running a neighborhood store.

“We had all we needed,” she said, “but there was never anything to spare. I always wanted a pony. Papa said to get a good education and a job, and I could buy my own. I never forgot that. I met my husband in college. After we graduated and got married, I taught high school history, and he became an accountant. We didn’t work as hard as my parents had to, but we poured all our money into our family, just like they did. After our last child got married, I wanted to retire and buy some land.”

“My mother wants to travel after my father retires,” I said.

“So did my husband. After all those years behind a desk, he was ready for some adventure and a change of scenery. He didn’t want to buy land, let alone a horse.”

“You’d asked him before?”

“Many times. He insisted we go on cruises instead. But when he died, I took his life insurance money and bought Buttercup and a big red stable for her to live in.”

She laughed hard enough to jostle her bed. The pain shot through her leg again.

“Ow. I just hope she’s okay.”

“I’m sure she is, if she’s as tough as her owner.” I pointed to the clock. “It’s almost morning. You’ll be able to call and find out.”

“Thank you, Agnes. I think I’ll get a little sleep now.”

She closed her eyes. I went back to bed.

I was about to doze off when she said, “I guess I must seem pretty silly.”

“Actually, I was thinking how much I admire you. Not everyone can keep believing in their dream when no one takes them seriously.”

We both slept.

When I woke up hungry and sore, I looked over at Geneva’s bed. She was gone.

Dolley bustled in.

“You’re awake,” she said. “How do you feel?”

“I’ve felt better,” I said.

Chapter 5 ~ A Crippled Rider

She handed me an envelope from her pocket. “Muriel asked me to give you this.”

“Are you friends?” I asked

“No, she’s my sister.” She raised the bed and fluffed my pillows. “They’ll be bringing your breakfast soon.”

“Where’s Geneva?”

“She went downstairs for X-rays.”

“Will she be okay?”

Dolley stopped at the door. “You know I can’t discuss another patient with you.”

“Can you tell me if her horse is okay?”

She laughed. “If you’re still here when her nephew visits, you can ask him.”

Alone, I opened the envelope and unfolded the letter. A faded photograph of a husband, wife, and two children was inside. I stared at the picture a long time. Though the people were strangers to me, I couldn’t help smiling when I looked at them. Whether the photographer had said something to make them laugh or they were simply happy to be together, their joy was infectious. They were seated on the steps of the Drifters’ Inn. The father, holding a baby girl, sat between his wife and son.

The letter explained.

Dear Agnes,

I’m so sorry about your accident. Don’t worry about your medical bills. I’ll take care of everything.

I won’t ask you to excuse the colonel, though in many ways he is not responsible for his actions. But before you talk to the police, take a close look at this photo. If you knew the man Ryder once was and tried to understand how much he’s lost, perhaps you could find it in your heart to forgive him.

I’ll do all I can to find out about this Brooker fellow, and I’ll let Jonas know as well.

Muriel

I ate my oatmeal and hummed Geneva’s song.

Chapter 6



A Meeting of Minds

Tote bag in hand and tears in her eyes, my mother surged into my hospital room as I was finishing breakfast.

“Oh, Agnes, it was that man, wasn’t it, the strange man who was following you? He did this, didn’t he? Have they found him yet? Have you pressed charges?”

“No, Mom. It wasn’t him. It was someone else.”

“Your father is so upset. He’s coming up after work on Friday.”

She lifted the lid on the water pitcher.

A doctor opened the door.

“Miss Quinn, is it? I’m Dr. Monroe.” He flipped through my chart. “On a scale of one to ten, how much pain are you experiencing?”

“About a seven. I hurt everywhere, but I can’t feel my eye. It’s still under there, isn’t it?”

“Yes, your eye is fine. You were very fortunate. If you’d fallen a few inches the other way, you’d be wearing a patch.”

“I’m Mrs. Quinn. Is my daughter going to be all right?”

“Yes. She has a mild concussion, but the only treatment for that is rest.” He pulled on latex gloves and undid the bandage. “The laceration required eight stitches, but you have no broken bones. Amazing—after such a fall.”

“How long do I need to stay?” I asked.

“After the nurse applies a new bandage, you’ll be free to go. I’ll send you home with antibiotics and something for pain. The nurse will give you instructions for cleaning the wound. Call my office this afternoon to make an appointment to have the stitches removed.”

My mother spoke up. "Will she have a scar?"

"Probably. It was a very irregular cut." He peered at my eye for a final time. "You're going to have a black eye for a while. I can refer you to a plastic surgeon to get rid of the scar."

When he left, my mother collapsed into the chair and sank her head into her hands.

"What's wrong, Mom? Are you all right?"

She sobbed. "I'm so relieved. When the police called and said you'd had an accident and were unconscious, we were so worried."

"How did you get here?"

"I rode the bus and then took a taxi at the station."

"You must be exhausted. Go have some breakfast. I'll get dressed, and we'll go home."

She brightened. "I'll get to see Saturn again. I hadn't thought of that."

"Saturn," I said. "I forgot all about him. He must wonder what happened to me."

"I'm sure he's all right. Cats are very resourceful. I'll get some coffee and be right back."

I waited till she closed the door before I sat up. My head was still cloudy, but I was determined to get back to my cat, now that I'd had enough presence of mind to think of him. At the moment I stood, Dolley strode into the room.

"Hold on a minute. You can't try that without help. Besides, I have to re-bandage that eye. Last thing I need to do before I go home."

She put her hand under my elbow and eased me onto the bed.

"I need to go home," I said. "I forgot about my cat. He must be starving by now."

"You have to wait for the police anyway. They came last night, but you weren't up to talking to them."

"Police? What for?"

"This isn't the first time Mr. Ellershaw has scared the daylights out of somebody. Muriel says he can't be blamed for his actions, but quite frankly, I wish they'd put him away."

"Mr. Who?" I winced as she pressed on the adhesive tape.

"Ryder Ellershaw. The man she calls Colonel. His wife's been gone for years—divorced him and remarried. Muriel's not helping him by buying into his delusions."

"I wish I knew what I did to upset him," I said.

Chapter 6 ~ A Meeting of the Minds

“Muriel could explain. She knows what sets him off.” She gave the bandage a final look. “Now don’t get that wet for twenty-four hours. I’ll bring the instructions for cleaning your wound, along with your discharge papers.”

When Dolley opened the door, a stocky man in a dark-brown suit stood aside to let her leave. “Agnes Quinn?” he asked. “Lieutenant Watson. Are you up for a few questions?”

He took notes as I described the events of the previous morning.

“So Mr. Ellershaw didn’t threaten or warn you. The object he threw did not hit you, but when you dodged it, you tripped and fell, and that’s what caused your injury.”

“That’s correct.”

“This is good news for the assailant, but you won’t have your day in court.”

“I don’t want a day in court. He may be a basket case, but he’s Muriel’s friend. I don’t care about seeing him in jail.”

By the time my mother came back, I was ready to go. I hated to leave without saying goodbye to Geneva or knowing how she was, but I had no choice. Armed with two prescriptions, I yielded to Dolley’s order to sit in the wheelchair. As she pushed me toward the exit she reached in her pocket and held a card over my shoulder.

“If you need anything, call me at this number. I may not be able to get back to you right away, but I will return your call.”

I blinked my good eye at her card.

“Does this say ‘Dolley Madison, R.N.’?” I asked.

“Yes, that’s my name. The ‘Dolley’ is for my great-grandmother. I married into the ‘Madison.’ I did give that some thought before I agreed. Here’s your ride.”

A rusty white pickup pulled next to the curb. Jonas Grinstead got out of the truck and approached my mother.

“Mrs. Quinn, it’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Jonas Grinstead. I teach with your daughter. Morning, Dolley.”

“Jonas,” Dolley said, “why in the world are you in that truck? I thought Muriel was going to loan you her van.”

“She offered, but I refused.” He took my hand to help me from the wheelchair. “There is no smoother riding vehicle in this town. Dual air shocks.”

I climbed in to sit on the seat beside him. He was right—no limousine could’ve provided a smoother ride.

When we reached my apartment, Jonas told my mother to wait so he could open her door. She giggled like a teenager.

“Do you have your key, Agnes?” Mom asked.

“It’s in my purse.” I leaned forward to reach it.

“No need,” Jonas said.

He nodded toward my front door. There stood Muriel with Saturn in her arms.

She waved. “Welcome home.”

As my mother hurried toward Saturn, Jonas helped me out of the truck.

“There you go,” he said. “Are you okay?”

“I think so—a little rough around the edges.”

He lowered his voice. “I want to thank you, Agnes, for your act of kindness.”

“What do you mean?”

“Muriel told me about Brooker and how you refused to talk to him. If he’d asked anyone else, I’m sure they’d have been happy to provide all the details of my life.”

“Does anyone know the details of your life?” I asked.

“They think they do.” He winked at me. This was the real Jonas Grinstead—not the irritable man I’d mistaken for a janitor, not the elusive bachelor Trixie was trying to snag, and not the mysterious real estate partner Brooker was trying to locate.

We walked toward the front door.

“Muriel said you came to the shop to ask her advice and that’s when Ryder got out of hand. If you hadn’t been there on my account, this never would’ve happened,” he said.

“Don’t worry about it. I have a feeling this is going to end up being one of the best things that ever happened to me.”

Muriel welcomed us. My apartment was spotless. The table, which I’d never actually set with plates and serving dishes, was adorned from end to end with steaming bowls and luscious colors. Jonas guided me toward a chair. Muriel swept her hand through the air like a magician.

“We have Swiss steak, mashed potatoes, gravy, a lovely squash casserole, homemade rolls, and, in honor of the occasion, cherry pie for dessert.”

Jonas sat across the table from my mother. “How does cherry pie honor the occasion?”

“Don’t be silly. Cherry pie is as American as George Washington and always suitable.”

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“I think that’s ‘as American as apple pie,’ ” my mother said.

“Either way, it’s better than the twenty-four cans of soup in the pantry.”

I reached for the potatoes. “There was a two-for-one sale. How did you pull this off, Muriel? I mean, how did you get in?”

“Your landlord is a long-time customer, so there was no problem getting a key.”

“You shouldn’t have gone to all this trouble,” I said.

“It’s the least I could do after I nearly got you killed,” Muriel said.

“You didn’t almost get me killed. It was my own fault. I never should have bothered you when I knew you were busy.”

“Thank you for not making a scene with Lieutenant Watson,” Muriel said. “The police have lost their patience with Ryder. They’d love to have an excuse to commit him.”

I started to say “I know,” but decided to wait till my mother went home before I mentioned Ryder’s midnight visit.

My mother spooned gravy over her potatoes. “I think he *should* be committed,” she said. “People who don’t know how to behave in polite society don’t need to be running loose. You’ll forgive me for saying so.”

“It was all a misunderstanding,” Muriel said. “More squash, Jonas? Ryder thought Agnes was insulting me when she left like that—”

“Like what?” I said. “All I did was walk out the door.”

“Unfortunately, that’s how his wife said goodbye—turned her back on him and waved over her shoulder while he was begging her to stay.”

“You need to stop humoring him,” Jonas said.

“I know. But I’ve listened to you plenty of times when you poured out your heart—”

Jonas glared at Muriel as if she were revealing state secrets. Quick and effective, the silent exchange was lost on my mother, but not on me.

Muriel changed course. “Coffee, anyone?”

As I sat there savoring delectable food and pleasant company, I realized I’d been living the self-imposed life of a hermit for too long. I looked around at my apartment—bare walls, simple furnishings, half-empty bookshelves. If Ryder Ellershaw had hit his intended target or if I’d fallen through the window, my life would have been over. What would I have to show for it? A couple of diplomas and a stack of ungraded vocabulary quizzes.

“Agnes. Agnes,” my mother said.

“What? Sorry—I was someplace else.”

“Muriel asked if we’d like to sleep at her house tonight, since she has plenty of rooms and you have only one bed.”

“Thanks, but I want to stay here,” I said. “I don’t want to leave Saturn.”

“I’m not going to leave you here alone,” my mother said. “I’ll be fine on the couch.”

Muriel refilled Jonas’ coffee cup. “All right. I’ll finish cleaning up and then we’ll leave you two to catch up on family news.”

“What about you, Jonas?” my mother said. “Don’t you need to get back to school?”

“I took the day off,” he said. He stood and stepped behind my chair. “Come along now, Agnes. You need to rest. Sofa okay?”

“Wait a minute,” Muriel said. “She needs to take her pills.”

“I’ll get them,” my mother said.

An insistent pounding on my front door startled us. My mother moved toward the door. She’d barely opened it when I heard a voice I thought I recognized.

“Is this the residence of Agnes Quinn?”

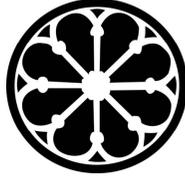
“Yes,” my mother said.

“I need to speak to her,” the visitor said.

Jonas walked to my mother and pulled the door open. “We’ve just brought her home from the hospital. She’s not up to visitors. May I ask your name and give her a message?”

“Yes, you can. Tell her Zane Plumley is here and wants to know why she ruined my brother’s life.”

Chapter 7



A Fork in the Road

I pictured Zane Plumley bursting into song. As his hand pressed against the half-open door, the afternoon sun, like a spotlight, framed his silhouette. Scowling, he resembled a lead tenor in opera, preparing to sing an aria which would modulate our happy scene into a minor key. Jonas, Muriel, Mother, and I, like a well-rehearsed quartet, mingled our voices in a libretto to rival *The Magic Flute*.

“What have you done?” my mother asked.

“Nothing,” I said. “It wasn’t my fault.”

“Who is your brother?” she asked Zane.

“Stay where you are,” Jonas said, his foot wedged at the base of the door.

“Xander,” Zane said. “We have a sister, too.”

“Is your sister with you?” Mother asked.

“No, she’s home planning her wedding.”

Muriel came from the kitchen. “Do you know this man?”

“I’ve heard of him,” I said, “and seen his picture, but never met him till today.”

She dried her hands with a towel. “Then how can he say you’ve hurt his brother?”

“It wasn’t my fault,” I said.

“He’s gone to Australia because of her.”

Zane edged in; Jonas stayed by the door.

“Let him in,” I said. “It’s Xander’s brother. They look exactly alike.”

“*Everyone* has a twin,” my mother said. “I read it somewhere.”

“Not twins—triplets—their sister’s Yolanda. Let him in. He’s tired. Xander looked just like that when he stayed up all night.”

My mother turned pale. “And when were you up all night with Andrew?”

“Not Andrew—Xander. I wasn’t up all night with him. We met for lunch every day. Let him in, so we can get this settled.”

Jonas stepped aside and Zane slipped in.

Dizzy again, I leaned back against the pillows. Seeing “Xander” when it wasn’t Xander was more than I could handle. I closed my eye.

Jonas brought a chair from the kitchen. “Would you like to sit down?”

“Thank you,” Zane said. “I’ve been on the road since yesterday.”

My mother sat on the sofa next to me. “All right, Agnes, who is Xander?” she asked.

“A friend of mine in college,” I said.

Zane jumped up, saying, “He was in love with her, and she broke his heart. Now he’s in the Australian outback, most likely with a ring in his nose and having babies with an aboriginal wife.”

“I don’t think they do that in Australia,” my mother said. “Put rings in their noses, I mean, not ‘have children,’ because of course anyone anywhere can have children.”

I opened my eye but found nothing changed. There sat Zane glaring at me, my mother smiling at him, Jonas with one eyebrow raised, and Muriel with a dish towel over her shoulder.

“Would you like something to eat?” Muriel asked Zane. “We have leftovers.”

“I ... haven’t eaten since breakfast,” he said.

I called down silent blessings on Muriel, who always knew what to do. Without a single blow, she’d knocked him off balance.

Mother took her cue from Muriel.

“We’ve gotten off to a bad start, Mr.—what was your name again?”

“Plumley,” he said.

“Plum-ley.” She made a mental note. “We don’t mean to be rude. We’re still a little on edge about the violent crime committed against my daughter yesterday.”

“It wasn’t a violent crime,” I said. “It was an accident.”

Zane’s voice softened. “What happened?”

“You had to be there,” I said.

“She’s right,” my mother said. “I’ve heard the story twice and it still makes no sense.”

"You look pretty rough," Zane said. "Do you have other injuries?"

"I didn't break anything except my pride ... what little I have left."

"She has *eight* stitches," my mother said, "and an awful black eye."

"This does complicate matters," Zane said. He rubbed his forehead.

"Need some aspirin?" I asked. "We have plenty."

Despite his abrupt entrance, he was so like Xander I had to fight the compulsion to rush into his arms.

He nodded. "I have a terrible headache—drove too long, nothing to eat. I thought I'd feel better once I told you off, but now that I've seen you, I can't say what I planned."

"That's very thoughtful of you," my mother said.

"*Thoughtful* isn't the word I'd use," Jonas said. "Chances are he would've said precisely what he wanted if he'd found Agnes alone."

"I'm not that kind of man," Zane said.

"Then what *did* you hope to accomplish?" Jonas asked.

Zane took the plate Muriel gave him. "I'm not sure. My sister's getting married in a few months and wants Xander at her wedding. She thought Agnes might—"

"Coffee, anyone?" Muriel said.

"You can't reach him in Australia?" Jonas asked.

"No. For the last year he's only communicated with his roommate, who's kind enough to forward his messages to my mother."

"That doesn't sound like Xander," I said. "He talked about your family all the time."

"He's staying away because of my father," Zane said. "He's never tolerated failure from us, much less a scandal. I couldn't face him either, if I'd been through what Xander has."

Muriel laid a napkin on Zane's knee. "Have you thought of hiring a private investigator?"

"My mother wanted to," Zane said, "but my father said he wouldn't waste good money to have Xander chased all over the planet."

Muriel smiled. "Agnes knows one you could hire."

"Not funny," I said.

"But it would solve everyone's problem," Muriel said. "Brooker would be out of our hair, and who knows? He might find Zane's brother."

"Who's Brooker?" my mother asked.

"I'll tell you later," Muriel said and returned to the kitchen.

"But why would you think I could help you find Xander?" I asked.

“Because of the package we got in the mail,” Zane said.

“From Xander?”

“No, his roommate—Rupert Hornby. He’s graduating, so he had to clean everything out of their apartment.”

“What was in the package?” I asked.

“Research notes, letters, photos, the police report, and Xander’s journal. When my mother read what Xander wrote about you, she decided to look for you.”

“What did he say?” I asked.

Zane glanced at my mother. “You’d probably rather read that for yourself.”

“Do you have it with you?” I asked.

He nodded.

“But does he say it was Agnes who ruined his life?” my mother asked.

“He didn’t say that in the letter he wrote to me,” I said.

Zane leaned forward. “When was that?”

“Graduation—at the end of our sophomore year.”

“That was years ago,” Zane said.

“May of ’73,” I said, surprising all of us when tears spilled onto my cheeks. “And since then, not a day has gone by I haven’t thought of Xander. I owe him so much. It was because of him I got serious about my education. I gave up writing my book and became a teacher. I took this job because . . .” I couldn’t go on.

Four startled faces stared at me.

Plate in hand, Zane stood. “I’m still hungry. May I have seconds?”

Muriel took Zane’s plate. “Good idea. We have pie.”

“I thought you did all those things to please your father,” my mother said.

Only Jonas remained silent, his pale-blue eyes locked onto mine as if he’d always known.

Thus does pain recognize itself in the eyes of another.

Muriel rejoined us. “Betty,” she said, “how about a tour of the Drifters’ Rest? Annabelle will be making scones and fresh coffee. You could relax awhile.”

“I appreciate the offer,” my mother said, “but Agnes might need—”

“I’ll be all right,” I said. “I’m going to answer Zane’s questions and then take a nap. Go with Muriel. I’ll be fine.”

“All right, but call if you need anything.” Mom reached for her purse.

Chapter 7 ~ A Fork in the Road

Jonas stood. "I'll be going, too. You can stay at my place tonight, Mr. Plumley, if you have no other plans."

"Thank you," Zane said. "I'll take you up on that."

"My number's by the phone," Jonas said. "Call when Mr. Plumley's ready to leave."

"Thank you, Jonas," I said, "for everything."

Muriel opened the door for my mother. Jonas followed them out.

Left alone, Zane and I stared at the floor till he said, "I never should've come here."

"I'm glad you did," I said. "You've provided a way for me to have contact with your mother. Does she know you've come?"

"No, Yolanda didn't want to get her hopes up."

"And your father?"

"He's at a conference in Seattle—won't be home till the end of next week. Do you want some help with that?"

I'd been rubbing my sore eye as Zane talked. The gush of tears had soaked the bandage and I was struggling to remove it.

"I wasn't supposed to get these stitches wet for twenty-four hours," I said. "You don't think I broke them loose, do you?"

"Want me to take a look at it? I have experience with treating injuries."

"Xander said you were majoring in modern languages. Did you switch to pre-med?"

"No," Zane said. "I spent a semester working at a refugee camp in Africa—got some medical training before I went. I'll wash my hands."

When he returned, he moved his chair next to the sofa and removed the bandage.

"There—is that better?" he asked.

"Thank you. It's not bleeding, is it?"

"No, but that's quite a shiner you've got. Look, Agnes, I need to apologize. I don't usually behave like an idiot when I meet someone."

"Don't give it a thought. I've always wanted to meet you. You comb your hair."

"What?"

"You comb your hair. I always wondered what Xander would look like if he'd only comb his hair, and now I know."

"I've always thought I was better looking than Xander," he said.

I did, too, but didn't say so.

“All right,” I said. “I’ve been waiting a long time to find out about Xander. Start talking.”

He sighed. “You know Xander left for Scotland three years ago.”

“I do,” I said. “I could never find out anything after that.”

“The first year was fine, but at the start of the next year, that Putnam girl showed up.”

“Jonquil? How did she manage? Her grades were nowhere near good enough.”

“She wasn’t a student,” Zane said. “Her stepfather got her a job as a nanny. The father of the family she worked for was heading up an overseas branch for Bridger’s business.”

I shuddered. “Nanny? No one in his right mind would trust Jonquil with children.”

“When Jameson Bridger recommended her, that was enough,” Zane said. “How do you refuse a reference from your boss?”

“Good point.”

“Every weekend Jonquil took a train to Glasgow to visit Xander. He was nice to her out of respect for her stepfather, but she started demanding his time. His work suffered.”

“He never liked his schedule interrupted,” I said.

“After two months of it, he finally had enough. He told her she couldn’t visit every weekend. He stopped taking her calls. She still came. One weekend he left early on Friday—”

“Xander left the lab early? He must’ve really been rattled.”

Zane nodded. “—and took a train to Edinburgh to avoid her. He came back Sunday night and found a note on his door. She said she’d be back and if he didn’t see her, he’d be sorry.”

“What happened?”

“The next Friday she stormed into his lab dragging a screaming child behind her.”

“She went to his lab?”

“Pitched a fit—scraped equipment onto the floor and flew into Xander with all fours. Before he could calm her down, somebody called the police.”

“Please tell me they arrested her,” I said.

“The police took her and Xander and the little boy. When they got to the station, they discovered the parents had reported their son missing.”

“They didn’t know Jonquil had him with her?”

Chapter 7 ~ A Fork in the Road

“No. When the police questioned her, she claimed it was Xander’s idea, so they detained both of them till the parents arrived.”

“Xander must have been mortified.”

“The next day the story was in the paper. When Xander came to the lab that morning, his supervisor said the dean wanted to see him. Xander never showed up in the dean’s office.”

“So ... if you know this whole story and Jonquil is obviously to blame, why do think I’m the one who ruined Xander’s life?”

He slumped down in his chair. “I guess it’s because we want to blame someone, and there’s no way to get to Jonquil.”

“To be honest,” I said, “I’ve never stopped blaming *myself* for losing Xander.”

“That’s the idea we got from some of the things he wrote—that somehow his change of direction all began when he lost you.”

“He didn’t *lose* me. He *left* me.”

Zane stood. “Maybe it’d be better if you read his notes for yourself. I’ll be right back.”

“Did you bring a bag, too,” I asked, “or leave home in such a fury you forgot?”

He laughed. “Yes, I brought a toothbrush and a change of clothes.”

“Then take a shower if you want. After that, you can take a nap on my bed while I read. When you wake up, we’ll try to piece the story together.”

He came in from his car and handed me the journal.

“I’d like to take a look at Xander’s letter to you,” he said, “if you still have it.”

He was startled when I laughed. “Oh, I still have it. It’s in the bottom drawer of the desk over there. Help yourself.”

He opened the drawer and lifted out the letter. “Is this it?”

“That’s it.”

He looked down again. “And is this the book you mentioned?”

“Book?”

“When you were crying, you said you ‘gave up writing your book.’ May I read it?”

He held up the blue binder, the index card bearing the title still taped to the cover.

“Be my guest,” I said.

When Zane left the room, I took a deep breath and opened the journal.

I was surprised Xander had begun his entries our freshman year. Though he'd penned poisonous insults about Trevor, he hardly mentioned Jonquil, whom I'd considered a pervasive presence in our lives. His opinions of me varied from affection to amusement to despair. He wrote at length about my obsession with Robinson Trask and cited newspaper accounts about the Trask family's crooked business practices. He wrote pages and pages about his classes, his grades, his projects, and his experiments. Then there was Xander's infamous meeting with Jameson Bridger, which he described as being "in the right place at the right time."

After ninety minutes I was worn out, not only because my one good eye was overworked, but also because Xander's praise for his own "sense of purpose" and his impatience with my "skewed sense of reality" annoyed me. Though his writing revealed he'd been as idealistic about his future as I'd been about mine, he'd rated his objectives "substantial" and mine "flimsy." But when I read, *maybe if I'd stayed at Stanton-Giles, Agnes and I could've straightened things out and started over. I could've helped her through college ...* I'd had enough of his sermonizing.

I pitched the book over my shoulder so hard it bounced off the wall and hit the floor.

The noise brought Zane into the living room. He had my manuscript in his hand.

"What happened?" he asked.

"I ... dropped Xander's journal on the floor."

He walked to the front of the sofa. "Where is it?"

"Back there," I said, pointing behind me.

He looked where I'd indicated. "Dropped it? Looks more like you threw it."

"I did throw it," I said. "Xander said he would've 'helped me' through college? I got through college just fine without him. Tell me—has he bothered to graduate yet?"

"Whoa, hold on," Zane said. He handed me my manuscript and walked across the room to retrieve the battered volume. "You should've kept reading."

"I can't right now. My eye hurts."

"Allow me." He flipped through the pages and read: "*I can't help loving Agnes even when she's confused, which is most of the time. I used to wish she'd stop daydreaming ...*"

"Right," I said. "I wouldn't have wanted to miss hearing that—"

Chapter 7 ~ A Fork in the Road

Zane read louder, silencing me. “... *but now I know that’s what I loved most about her—her insistence on dreaming big.*”

“Too late for that now, isn’t it?” I said.

Zane turned the page. “*If only I’d told her I loved her, instead of lecturing her, maybe she could’ve loved me, too. How could I know I’d never be the same without Agnes?*”

I sank back into the sofa. “Why didn’t he tell me sooner? I guess I didn’t make it easy for him. When I think how I went on and on about Trevor and the whole time Xander was—”

Zane sat next to me. “Want to tell me about it?”

I began with our freshman year and the fateful line-up—Plumley, Putnam, Quinn, and Rhodes—in Professor Harwood’s class. I tried to paint myself in the best possible light, justifying my obsession with Trevor and making light of my ambition to write. I ended with my unfortunate discussion with Ferguson Trask, my subsequent disillusionment with my mentor, Robinson Trask, and my resolve to prove myself worthy of Xander’s love.

“So,” Zane said, “you gave up writing because the Trask brothers wanted to turn your story into a comic book, and you thought your sacrifice would please Xander?”

“I never thought of it in exactly that way, but yes, that’s about the size of it.”

He took my manuscript. “You’ll forgive me, Agnes, but those are poor reasons.”

“What?”

He thumbed through my pages. “Your story is far from finished and needs some tightening in places, but your idea is workable and your style is engaging.”

“You mean that?”

“I do. I’ll admit I find Trevorode tiresome, but Lyda Rose is fully fleshed out. She practically jumps off the page.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. You need to stop making excuses and get back to work.”

“I won’t have much time now that I’m teaching.”

“We make time for what we want time for,” he said. “You know that.”

The phone rang. It was my mother. “Jonas came by and said he hadn’t heard from Mr. Plumley yet. It’s almost dinnertime. Are you two finished talking?”

“Yes. Tell Jonas he can pick up Zane when it’s convenient.”

“No need for that,” Zane said. “I’ll drive my car if he’ll give me directions.”

I relayed the message to my mother, who told Jonas. I hung up the phone.

“Jonas is bringing my mother home. You can follow him to his place. Will you leave in the morning or stay another day?”

“No need to stay longer. I want to spend some time with my mother. She’ll want to hear every detail. I’d better get my things together before Jonas gets here.”

He walked into my bedroom. There was a knock at the door.

Before I could walk the few steps to the door, the knocking grew louder and faster. If I’d been thinking clearly, I would’ve realized there was no way Jonas and my mother could have arrived so soon. When I opened the door, I found my father, a suitcase in one hand and a sleeping bag in the other.

“Dad? What are you doing here?”

“Can’t a father visit his only daughter when she’s been hurt?”

“Of course. I didn’t think you’d come till—”

He pushed into the room and set his bags down by the door. “This is a nice little place you have here.” He put his arms around me.

At that moment Zane came out of my bedroom with his suitcase in hand.

Dad released his grip on me. “And who, may I ask, are you?”

Zane held out his hand. “Zane Plumley. I’m a friend of Agnes.”

Dad stared at Zane’s suitcase. “And what sort of *friend* are you, exactly?”

“No, Dad, it’s not like that,” I said. “Zane came a long way ... on business and—”

“What kind of business are you in?”

“I’m working on my doctorate in—”

Dad turned to me. “And where is your mother?”

“She’s visiting a friend of mine.”

“I thought she came up here to take care of you.”

“She did, but after we had lunch, Muriel—”

“Who’s Muriel?”

“She’s the friend.”

“If you’ll excuse me,” Zane said, “I’ll put this in my car and wait outside for Jonas.”

Dad’s face reddened. “Who’s Jonas?”

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“A teacher at my school—the one I told you about,” I said.

Dad turned to Zane. “And how do *you* know him?”

“We met earlier. He offered me a place to stay. I’ll let myself out. Goodbye, Agnes.”

When Zane opened the door, there stood my mother, laughing. Either she had tripped on the step or Zane startled her when he opened the door as she was about to knock. Jonas, apparently to keep her from falling, had her by the arm. She was blushing and giddy. Zane backed into the room to let them in.

“Mom, look who’s here,” I said.

“Stuart,” she said, “I thought you weren’t coming till tomorrow.”

“When I told the boss Agnes was in the hospital, he said I could leave right away.” He pointed to Jonas. “And who is this?”

Jonas held out his hand. “Jonas Grinstead. I teach with your daughter.”

Mother interrupted. “Jonas offered to give me a ride after I spent the afternoon with Muriel. He came back here so Mr. Plumley could follow him to his house.”

Zane seized the moment. “Ready if you are, Jonas.” Again he tried to escape through the open door and again, instead of leaving, he stepped backwards into the room. “Excuse me,” Zane said to the new visitor, “may I help you?”

“I’m looking for Agnes Quinn.”

“Is she expecting you?” Zane asked.

“Maybe.”

“And you are ...”

“Name’s Brooker. It’s not really her I need to see. My business is with Mr. Grinstead, and don’t bother telling me he’s not here. That’s his truck in the driveway. I followed him.”

“Look here,” Dad said to Brooker, “I don’t know who you think you are, but—”

“Jonas,” Mother said, “what’s this about?”

“Why are you asking *him*?” Dad said. “What’s going on between you two?”

My mother turned red from her top button up to the gray roots of her brown bangs.

“Nothing,” Mother said. “Agnes, is this the man who knocked you out?”

Before I could say no, my father thundered, “*What?*” and lunged for Brooker, grabbed him by his dingy shirt, and pulled him into the room. “I was hoping I’d get to meet you while I was here.” Dad pinned Brooker to the wall.

Jonas stepped forward. "Wait, Mr. Quinn, this is not the man you want."

"And how would *you* know?" Dad said.

"Because I know the man who hurt Agnes and this isn't him."

Dad released Brooker.

"I have no business with you," Brooker said to my father. "I'm here because this guy's truck is out front. I want to settle with him so I can go home and collect for my services."

"Let's step outside," Jonas said, "and leave these people out of this."

Brooker straightened his rumpled clothes. "That's more like it. If this girl had answered my questions two days ago, none of this would've happened."

"I told her not to," Dad said. "Real men don't ask girls to do their dirty work for them."

"I'm not a girl, Dad," I said as Brooker followed Jonas out the door.

"My father feels the same way about my sister," Zane said.

Dad waited till Zane closed the door. "Now, would one of you tell me what's going on?"

"It's all right, Stu. Come in here and let me fix you some dinner."

"I think I'll take a bath," I said.

I went into my bedroom, closed the door, left the light off, tiptoed to the window, pulled back the curtain, and peeked out. Brooker, Jonas, and Zane were still in the driveway. Brooker leaned against his gray sedan. He had a stack of papers in his hand and was punctuating his sentences by shaking them in Jonas' face. Zane stood motionless beside Jonas.

My mother tapped on the door. "Agnes, are you all right?"

"I'm getting my pajamas." I stepped away from the window and turned on the light. As I rummaged through my dresser drawer, Saturn crept out from under the bed.

"Smart cat," I said.

After a long bath, I returned to my room and looked out again. The driveway was empty.

I noticed Xander's journal on my nightstand. Glad Zane had left it behind, I opened my dresser drawer and hid the brown leather volume under my sweaters. Then I put on the pink seersucker robe my mother had given me the previous Christmas and rejoined my parents.

"How nice," Mom said. "That robe has really held up to washing. It looks almost new."

"Yes, it's very nice." I wore it only when I was around my mother.

“Now, Agnes,” Dad said, “can you start from the beginning and tell me what happened?”

I complied, though I felt too tired to go through the story yet again. I painted Brighton Park in the worst possible light and stressed Trixie’s and Mavis’ distaste for me.

“See what I meant when I told you I don’t belong here?” I asked.

“Like I told you on the phone, Aggie, if I’d left a job every time I didn’t get along with my coworkers, you wouldn’t be sitting here today, healthy, well-educated, and employed.”

“And with straight teeth,” Mom said.

I pointed to my black eye and scar. “Do you call this *healthy*?”

“Freak accident,” Dad said. “Could’ve happened anywhere. There are all kinds of troubled people in this world, and you happened to run into one of them.”

Mom spoke up. “I don’t think it will happen again. He promised me.”

“He promised you?” I said.

“What are you talking about, Betty?” Dad set his coffee cup on the end table.

Mom lowered her eyes. “I met him today.”

“Where?” Dad placed his elbows on his knees and leaned forward—never a good sign.

“At Muriel’s restaurant. I introduced myself and after we talked awhile, I asked him what Agnes did to make him so angry.”

“How many men have you met, anyway?” Dad asked. “First, you’re driving all over town with this Jonas guy and now you’re cozying up to the man who assaulted our daughter?”

“I didn’t cozy up to him,” Mom said.

I walked to the front door.

“And where do you think you’re going?” Dad asked.

“I’m going to sit on the porch. I’ve been cooped up for two days.”

“Should you be out there alone?” Mom asked.

“I’ll be all right. You can have my bed, Mom. There’s plenty of room on the floor for Dad’s sleeping bag. I’ll take the sofa.”

I closed the door behind me and stepped out into the warm night air. Suspended low, the moon shone full and wondrous between the branches of the live oaks. I wished Zane were standing beside me. He would’ve quoted Yeats—“The Silver Apples of the Moon.” Xander would’ve mumbled

something about the moon “being in its perigee.” Why had I met the wrong Plumley man first? Zane was perfect for me. And he liked my book.

My mother opened the front door. “Dad and I are going to turn in. Lock the door before you go to sleep.”

I took one last look at the moon, went inside, picked up my unfinished novel, lay down on the sofa, and fell asleep reading the first page, written in those far-off foolish years when I still believed in my silly dream and the boundless possibilities ahead.

When I woke I found my father reading the newspaper.

“Morning,” he said. “Your friend called.”

I sat up. “Who?”

“Your friend. Said he forgot something. Needs to stop by on his way out of town.”

I tried to smooth my hair as I sprinted toward the bathroom, but I was too late. When my father heard Zane knock on the door, he let him in before I could object.

“Good morning,” Zane said. “I forgot the journal. I can’t go home without it.”

I brought the journal from my bedroom and gave it to him.

“Thank you,” I said. “No matter what I said yesterday, it really did help to read this.”

He leaned in, kissed me on the cheek, and then whispered in my ear, “Finish your book.”

Chapter 8



A Promising Future

The second time a Plumley man left me was no easier than the first.

I longed to linger in the open door till Zane drove out of sight, but not wanting to appear wistful I gave a sprightly wave and stepped back inside. Grateful my father was hidden behind his morning paper, I sank onto the sofa, leaned my head back, and gazed at the ceiling.

This wasn't the first time I'd fallen in love in less than twenty-four hours.

My mother came out of the bedroom. "What's wrong, honey? Dizzy again?"

I sat up. "No. I was ... thinking about how embarrassing it will be when I go back to work. Everyone's going to stare."

Not what I was pondering, but plausible enough.

"I'm sure word has gotten around by now," she said. "Everyone will be glad you're all right, no matter how you look."

"I hate starting my career looking like a kid who fell off her bike." I paused, and then took the plunge. "This week has been like some sort of omen."

My father bent down a corner of his paper, peered at me, and went back to reading.

Mom sat down and patted me on the shoulder. "Don't worry. Daddy and I are going to help you get on your feet and ready to go back to work."

Dad folded his paper. "How about breakfast?"

"There's nothing here to eat," I said. "Maybe half a box of cereal. No milk."

He laid the paper on the table. "I spotted a Bob's Pancake World on my way into town. I could do with some good coffee and a couple of eggs, couldn't you, Betty?"

“Oh, Stu, what a good idea. Wouldn’t that be nice, Agnes? Remember how we used to *love* to go to breakfast together?”

Not exactly. Once I was old enough to stay home alone, I declined my parents’ weekly invitation to Bob’s. I hated the smell of frying pork and the servers’ wearing grits-spattered aprons and calling everyone “Sugar.” But how could I say no to my parents’ offer? They’d travelled a long way. My dad was missing work. And I had to appear in public sooner or later. Bob’s, frequented for the most part by truck drivers and construction workers, would be the perfect place for me to slip in unnoticed. Besides that, people-watching at Bob’s would keep my mind off Zane.

Riding in the backseat of the family car, I felt like a nine-year-old on my way to Grandma’s house. I nodded as my mother complimented the “tidy” streets of my town and remarked how near I lived to a grocery store and the post office. Mom reached her hand over the seat to pat my knee. “You’ll come home for Thanksgiving this year, won’t you? I have a new recipe for corn casserole. Toby and Janette will be there with the boys.”

My brother and his wife had added a third son, Alfred David, to their family. William, excelling in first grade, and Lewis, already reading at the age of four, offered further evidence my parents’ capable rearing of their son was being propagated to another generation of Quinns. Every nickel they’d invested in Toby’s life—every loaf of bread for his lunches, every spiral notebook for his homework, every pair of shoes for track season, and every dollar squirreled away for his college tuition—had been well spent. He was everything they could have hoped for.

They’d never worried about Toby the way they’d worried about me. I stared at my dad’s profile and noticed his thinning hair and weathered face. It made me sad to think I might yet disappoint him. At the moment, my parents were proud of me and had peace of mind about my future. They were happy to have me in the backseat of their car. They were happy I’d agreed to have breakfast at a place they knew I didn’t like. They were happy I had two degrees and a promising career as an English professor in a community college.

If they’d only known I’d already vowed to leave Brighton Park as soon as possible, they’d have driven straight past Bob’s Pancake World to their house so they could keep an eye on me till I came to my senses.

Part of the ritual of eating at Bob’s Pancake World was the challenge of actually locating one. Though billboards welcomed travelers and directed them to the proper exit, the restaurant was almost impossible to find. Not to be thwarted, my dad guided our tank-sized Buick past a gas station on the corner, left at a traffic light, and into the entry for Hilda’s Motor Inn. There

beyond a weed-covered vacant lot were the parking spaces for Bob's. Threading our way among station wagons, rusting panel vans, dented pickup trucks, and towering semis, we came at last to an empty spot.

Though none of the working folks who'd arrived in *these* vehicles would expect their fellow patrons to be well-groomed, I still held my hand to the side of my face as we entered the building. A waitress with a pencil behind her ear greeted us.

"Welcome to Bob's. My name's Flo, and I'll be serving you today. Can I get coffee for everyone?" My parents agreed. "Coffee for you, too, hon?" she asked me.

When I turned to reply, she gasped. "What in the world happened to you, sweetie?"

"Accident," I said.

"Bless your heart. My boyfriend—not the one I have now—gave me a black eye. It took forever to go away. I got good tips that week. People feel sorry for you when you get beat up."

"I didn't get beat up—"

She continued without pausing to breathe. "The Grampa Joe is the special today. Three eggs any way you want, two waffles, bacon or sausage, biscuits and gravy. Buy one, get one free. I'll get your coffee and be right back."

Dad ordered the Grampa Joe special and asked for an extra plate. Sharing a meal among two or more was standard practice in our family.

After our coffee was served, our conversation turned to ordinary things. Mom reflected on Toby's completing his first week as the newly appointed chairman of the Math Department. Dad caught me up on the goings-on at work and shared greetings and get-well wishes from the people I'd worked with during my summer employment.

"And," Dad said, "the boss said to tell you if this town is too dangerous, you're still welcome back at your old job."

Mom laughed. "Isn't that a thought—Agnes' spending all that time getting *two* degrees only to walk away from her job?"

"Excuse me. Miss Quinn?"

One of my students stood at the end of our table. Though I couldn't have recalled most of the faces I'd seen on my first day in the classroom, I remembered this young man. He was exceptional in every way—well-mannered, polite, and with an unforgettable name.

"I'm sorry to bother you," he said. "When I saw you come in, I pointed you out to my grandmother. She's asked for a larger table so you can join us, if you'd like."

Trevorode the Defender

“Thanks just the same,” my father said, “but—”

Coffee mug in hand, my mother stood. “How nice,” she said. “Thank you.”

“These are my parents,” I said. “Stuart and Betty Quinn.”

My student extended his hand to my father. “I’m—”

“Exton Wrayburn the 4th,” I said.

Exton grinned. “Wow! How did you remember after only one class period?”

The truth was I thought his name sounded like a character in a novel, but I only said, “Your name is so distinctive—it’s hard to forget.”

“My grandmother will be pleased to hear you say that,” he said. “She’s right over here.”

Exton led us to his table and introduced his grandmother, Charlotte Wrayburn. Silver-haired, dressed in a long-sleeved navy-blue dress with pearl buttons, an exquisite diamond on her left hand, Charlotte seemed out of place in the plain, homespun setting.

She gestured to three chairs opposite her. “I’m so glad you could join us.”

Exton pulled out my chair. My mother waited for my father to do the same for her.

When we were all seated, Exton asked my father what line of work he was in.

While the men talked business, Charlotte addressed me and my mother.

“I was deeply sorry to hear about your accident, Miss Quinn.”

“Please call me Agnes,” I said.

“And call me Betty,” my mother said.

“I heard about your kindness to Mr. Ellershaw, Agnes,” Charlotte said. “I commend you for not pressing charges.”

“You know him?” I asked.

“He and my husband were great friends. Ryder was a local hero when he first came home. Sadly, after his trouble with his wife, he became better known for being irascible.”

“But how did you find out I—?”

“I’m on the board of trustees of your school. It’s my duty to check on our teachers.”

“The doctor said she was lucky to be alive,” my mother said.

Charlotte glanced at my eye. “I’m sure that’s true,” she said.

Breakfast arrived. Though I was mortified when my parents parceled out their food onto the extra plate and handed it to me, Charlotte gave no indication she noticed this frugality. She asked the server for more coffee and

proceeded to cut her waffles into delicate bites and dip them into a pool of syrup on her plate.

“Ex rarely mentions his teachers anymore,” Charlotte said, “but he couldn’t wait to tell me his English professor had read the first chapter of *Great Expectations* to his class.”

“Agnes has always loved to read,” my mother said.

Charlotte looked at me. “He said you made the convict come alive.”

“I wanted to get my class interested from the beginning, so I wouldn’t need to persuade them to keep reading.”

“Following in the Dickensian tradition,” Charlotte said.

“The what?” my father asked.

“Dickens gave public readings of his works,” I said.

“Would you be interested in doing the same?” Charlotte asked.

“Agnes did some acting when she was in college,” my mother said.

“Not public readings, exactly,” Charlotte said. “Private readings for me.”

“In your home?” my mother asked, her eyes wide.

“I’ve always loved to read,” Charlotte said, “but my eyesight is poor. When Ex told me how much he’d enjoyed your class, I thought you might not mind reading to me.”

“I’d love to,” I said.

“Friday evenings?” she asked.

“Perfect,” I said. “When do you want to start?”

“This week,” she said, “if that will fit your schedule.”

The five of us had more coffee and parted as mutual admirers.

That afternoon while I rested, my father washed my car. Then he and my mother bought enough groceries to keep me in food for two weeks. After a home-cooked meal that night, Mom and I cleaned the kitchen while my father watched the evening news.

Dad called from the living room: “Better hurry. *Singin’ in the Rain* is coming on.”

Mom reached for the dish towel. “How nice. We can watch it together on our last night here.” She dried the last plate, and we joined my dad on the sofa.

Before long, Dad dozed off. I couldn’t blame him. We’d seen the film dozens of times. But my mother always gazed, starry-eyed, as if viewing each scene for the first time. For as long as I could remember, when she heard Gene Kelly sing, “You Were Meant for Me,” she’d turn to me and say, “I wish that was me dancing with him.” Tonight she was silent. I looked to see if she’d gone to sleep too, and found her staring at the television as if the screen had gone blank. Then she said something I never imagined I’d hear.

"I wish I hadn't stopped dancing," she said.

"You what?"

"I started lessons when I was six. When I got to be a teenager, I put on weight and my face broke out. I couldn't bear the thought of a recital, so I quit. I've regretted it my whole life."

I didn't know what to say. My mother in a pink tutu? Pirouetting? Or had she tapped?

"Why have you never told me this?" I asked.

She kept her eyes on the movie. "I don't know. When I look back on those days, I can hardly believe I used to be graceful and poised—not at all like I am now."

I sat on the edge of the sofa and faced her. "There are all kinds of places you and Dad could go to dance."

"I wanted to dance at our wedding reception," she said, "but your dad said it was silly. He refused to learn how and that was the end of that."

"But it's not too late," I said, and told her the story of Geneva Gilbey.

She was unmoved. "My point exactly."

"What do you mean?"

"Think, Agnes. Where is that poor woman at this moment?"

"In the hospital," I said.

"Not exactly a happy ending, is it?"

"So she's had a setback. She'll ride again someday. I'm sure of it."

Mom shook her head. "Do you know how hard it is for someone her age to recover from a broken bone? If she's as overweight as you say, healing will take even longer."

"That may be true, but dancing isn't as risky as horseback riding."

She looked at my father and then at me. "It might as well be. Let's not waste our last night together arguing about something that's never going to happen."

We watched the rest of the movie in silence. Mom woke Dad so they could go to bed. I lay awake on the sofa and imagined my mother in an emerald-green sequined gown, gliding over a gleaming floor. As I fell asleep, her image faded into Geneva Gilbey in blue jeans, a red-checked shirt, and a yellow cowboy hat. When the music ended, Geneva tipped her hat and sashayed through the doors of the ballroom, her boots leaving a trail of scuff marks on the floor.

I woke the next morning in a melancholy mood. I couldn't decide what made me sadder—Geneva with her broken leg or my mother with her broken dream. The morning passed quietly by. Dad checked under the hood of my car.

Chapter 8 ~ A Promising Future

Mom prepared her peerless macaroni and cheese and divided it into six servings. She placed five in the freezer and instructed me to eat the other one for dinner that night. We ate sandwiches for lunch and hugged each other goodbye.

I wasn't prepared for how alone I'd feel. After constant companionship for the last few days, the solitude was oppressive. I sat next to Saturn on the sofa and scratched his head.

"Even when I was in the hospital, I had Geneva to keep me company," I said, and thought of her lying there alone. Would her new roommate pull back the curtain between the beds?

"Don't take this personally," I said to Saturn, "but I have to get out of here for a while."

I made myself as presentable as possible and grabbed my car keys.

As I left my apartment, I heard a voice call, "Hey, you."

I turned to find Warner Bingham. Still dressed in black jeans and jacket, he had added aviator glasses to his attire and was holding a rake.

"Hello," I said. "Warner, isn't it?"

"You have a cat?" he asked.

"Yes."

He stood between me and my car. "Inside or outside?"

"What do you mean?"

He slid his glasses to the edge of his nose and glared over them.

"It's a simple question. Is your cat an inside cat or an outside cat?"

"Inside."

I edged backward toward my apartment. One black eye was enough.

He tapped his rake on the pavement. "What color is your cat?"

"Gray."

"So, if your cat is an *inside* cat," he said, like a lawyer questioning a perjured witness, "why did I see it in my mother's flower bed on Sunday night?"

I took another step backward and forced a timid laugh. "Oh, that." I explained Saturn's escape during the storm. "You haven't seen him in your flower bed since Sunday, have you?"

I walked around him, opened my car door, and stood behind it. "Are those your begonias?" I pointed toward the only flower bed in bloom.

"Yes."

"And is that your motorcycle?"

"Yeah. What about it?"

"Nothing. I—never knew bikers enjoyed gardening."

"I told you they're my mother's flowers."

"I'd like to meet her sometime," I said, "but I have to go. I'm on my way to the hospital."

He shouldered his rake like a rifle and swaggered back to the blossoms.

Shaking off images of Mrs. Bingham locked in a closet, I drove away.

I entered the hospital and walked toward the information desk, where I saw a burly man in jeans and a white, long-sleeved cowboy shirt with snaps on the pockets and cuffs. The silver buckle on his belt, straining against his considerable stomach, tapped on the front of the counter as he leaned in and addressed the receptionist.

"Since you're a lady," he said, "I'm gonna give you one more chance to tell me where my aunt Geneva is. Then I'm gonna yank them papers out of your hands and see for myself."

When I heard "Geneva," I stopped.

"I told you," the receptionist said, "her son authorized a transfer to another hospital."

He banged his hand on the counter. "I know that. What I'm askin' is *where*."

"Her son specified no information about her whereabouts was to be given to anyone."

He hit the counter again. "I ain't 'anyone.' I'm her flesh and blood."

The receptionist picked up the phone. "Security," she said.

"This ain't over," he said. "Not by a long shot."

He walked to a chair in the lobby, sat down, and buried his face in his hands.

I approached the receptionist. "Did I hear you say Mrs. Gilbey has been moved?"

"Yes, she's been moved," the receptionist said, "and no, I can't tell you where."

"I didn't ask," I said.

I approached Geneva's nephew and sat next to him.

"Excuse me," I said, "were you looking for Geneva Gilbey?"

He looked up, his brown eyes full of tears. "You a friend of hers?"

"We met a few nights ago. We were in the same hospital room." I pointed to my eye.

His face broke into a broad smile. "You're Agnes. You sure have saved me a lot of trouble, little lady."

"Me? How?"

Chapter 8 ~ A Promising Future

"Aunt Genny told me to find you. She told me how nice you was to her that night in the hospital." He held out his hand. "I'm Buck Sloan. Would you like to get some coffee?"

"I'd love some."

"I know just the place," he said. "Have you ever been to Bob's Pancake World?"

"It's a family favorite," I said.

I followed Buck in my car and then joined him at a table by a window. He must have been a regular. The server, Barb, touched his shoulder. "Hey there, Buck. You want your usual?"

"Nah. I ate a big lunch. Just bring me a glass of milk and some cornbread."

"Whole or low fat?"

"Better bring the hard stuff today and two glasses of water. What'll you have, Agnes?"

"Cousin Linda's Homemade Peach Cobbler."

Barb scowled at me and snatched my menu. Apparently, she entertained romantic notions about Buck and misinterpreted my presence at his table.

Buck stretched out his right arm across the back of the chair next to him. His face, bronzed by many hot summers, was smooth except for deep lines etched at the corners of his eyes. His dark hair was creased above his ears. He'd left a cowboy hat, no doubt, in his truck.

"Aunt Genny didn't tell me what happened to you," he said.

"It's a long story," I said. "I'd rather talk about Geneva."

Barb returned with two glasses of water, two glasses of milk, and six pieces of golden brown cornbread. The crust of my cobbler was burned around the edges.

"I heard your aunt took a fall, Buck. Was she hurt bad?" Barb asked.

He crumbled cornbread into his glass. "I'll tell you the truth. Since my dad put me on a horse forty years ago, when I was only three, I ain't never seen a rider hit the ground so hard."

"Is she doing better?" Barb asked. She angled her body so her back was to me.

"I don't know," Buck said. "Her son moved her to another hospital and didn't tell me."

"I'm sorry," she said, her hand on his shoulder again. "Maybe he'll call when he knows something. I'll be back later with more milk."

She did not inquire about a refill for me.

"I have to know," I said. "Is Buttercup all right?"

Trevorode the Defender

He smiled. "She's fine. Vet said she's got a bad sprain and won't win any races, but that's not why we bought her anyway."

"So Geneva will be able to ride her again after she recovers?"

He leaned on the table. "Mark my word. As long as there is one breath left in Geneva Gilbey's body, she'll come home to Sloan's Canyon."

"There are canyons around here?" I asked.

He laughed. "No. She wanted a Western-sounding name for her property and insisted on naming it after me."

"She told me how you offered to help her when she told you what she wanted to do."

He wiped his mouth. "My wife had just died. I needed to start a new life. Genny's son was ten kinds of put out with me, but then he's always hated me, even when we was kids."

I nibbled at a bit of lukewarm peach. "I guess her son was angry about the accident."

He slammed his spoon on the table. "You know what he said when I told him? He said, 'I knew this would happen. I hope you're satisfied.' Can you believe that?"

"I'm sorry," I said.

"In the years she's lived here, do you know how many times he's come to see her?" He held up his index finger. "Once." He took a blue bandana from his pocket and blew his nose.

Barb returned. When she laid the check by Buck's plate, I noticed she'd drawn a heart beneath her name. She reached for Buck's empty milk glass and pointed to my uneaten cobbler.

"You done with that?" she asked.

I met her gaze. "Yes. I'm done."

Buck peered around Barb as she cleared the table. "Aunt Genny said when I found you I should invite you to meet Buttercup. Would you like to—?"

With a quick flick of her wrist, Barb tipped over the water glass into my lap. She grabbed a cloth from her tray and dabbed at the spill.

"I'm so sorry," she said.

I stood and peeled the wet napkin from my leg.

"I guess I'll be going now," I said. "It was nice meeting you, Buck."

Buck handed Barb a twenty-dollar bill, told her to keep the change and followed me to the parking lot. When we got to my car, he reached in his shirt pocket, pulled out a business card, and handed it to me.

"Here's the number of the ranch," he said. "Buttercup will be expecting your call."

Chapter 9



A Loose Thread

When I arrived at home, Warner Bingham, polishing his motorcycle in the parking lot, ignored me when I waved. I hurried past him to my door. The phone was ringing.

“Hello, Agnes, we’re home.”

“Glad to hear it,” I said. “Did you have a nice trip?”

“Yes, we made good time. Did you have dinner yet?”

“No, I went for a long drive and just got back.” I decided not to mention Geneva or Buck.

“Good. Now remember—you promised to go to church in the morning and see Sharon.”

While my parents had been visiting, my father and I had done our best to divert our conversations from the subject of Sharon Merriman-Cheswick. But here was her name again—like a popcorn kernel wedged between two molars.

This wasn’t going to go away—it was time to put this task behind me and begin the second week of my last year at Brighton Park Community College with a clear conscience.

I sighed for effect. “What’s the name of the church again?” I hadn’t forgotten.

“First Episcopal of Maplewood.”

“You know that’s forty-five miles from here?”

“You don’t have to go every Sunday—just tomorrow. Can’t you do this for me?”

“O-oh-ka-ay.” I sounded like a four-year-old even to myself.

“Thank you. I’d hate to tell Jewel we came all that way and didn’t try to see her daughter. She’d be so disappointed, especially since she just got back from visiting Roger in prison.”

“I know, Mom. I’ll take care of it.”

“But you’ve been saying that ever since you moved to Plainview.”

I kept my voice even. “I’ve been kind of busy—moving and getting ready for school and then there was *that trip to the hospital*.”

My sarcasm was lost on her. “I tried not to mention Sharon while you were recovering, but you’re better now. Besides, going to church will be a good way to start your week.”

I couldn’t imagine a worse way to begin the week than a reunion with Sharon Merriman.

“Oh, and Agnes—one more thing,” my mother said. “When you see Sharon, don’t mention Roger. She doesn’t want the church members to know her brother is in prison.”

I left early as I had promised. I was surprised how beautiful the highway to Maplewood was. Lofty oaks lined both sides of the road and formed a lush green canopy, already dappled red, promising the brisker air of autumn. My spirits would have lifted if I hadn’t been engaged on such a grim errand. Even worse, the long drive to Maplewood allowed plenty of time to review my longtime feud with Sharon.

I was barely five years old when I first became conscious of Sharon’s overarching presence in my life. She was eleven then and already dazzling everyone she knew. I still remember coming in from the backyard to find Sharon sitting at our kitchen table while our mothers talked.

“You’re getting prettier every day,” my mother said to Sharon—an observation I could not remember her saying to me.

Jewel smoothed Sharon’s long blonde hair. “She’s so much like her father.”

I couldn’t see the resemblance at all. Doc Merriman was a wiry, bald-headed man with a long nose and thick glasses.

My brother and I never liked Sharon and liked her brother Roger even less. Nevertheless, my mother’s friendship with Jewel jumbled our families together in an uneasy pile for many years. Polite attendance by both families was expected at Toby’s annual science fair, my yearly piano recital, and the one football game Roger played in before he got kicked off the team.

This display of good manners seemed reasonable to my young mind for a while. But when Sharon’s dance recitals, voice recitals, and cheerleading

competitions occurred with tedious and grating repetition, we all began to complain. Eventually my father and brother were spared. But my mother assumed I, as a girl, would profit from observing Sharon's feminine mystique on display. I had precious little myself.

I might have tolerated all this misery if only Sharon had been worth the trouble. But she was quite simply the meanest person I ever knew. She never missed an opportunity to make fun of my freckles, height, weight, or curly hair. When I appealed to my mother, she admonished me to "be nice to Sharon for Jewel's sake." So I kept my mouth shut, especially when Doc Merriman broke Jewel's heart by shipping Roger off to military school.

As our families sat through Sharon's high school valedictorian speech, I was delighted she was going to college in another state. When she became Mrs. Merriman-Cheswick, I was even happier she and her husband were moving to California so he could go to seminary.

It wasn't until after I'd been hired at Brighton Park that my mother informed me Sharon's husband had been appointed rector of the Episcopal church in Maplewood, the town nearest to Plainview. When Mom came to visit and found herself a "mere forty-five miles" from her best friend's daughter, she couldn't rest till she'd seen her.

Mom was breathless when her first call connected her to Sharon's maid. She gave her name and then put her hand over the receiver. "Imagine that—a maid." Mrs. Merriman-Cheswick was out. The call was not returned.

The second call was a repeat of the first.

The third call was to the church. Mom was breathless when the secretary answered. She gave her name and then put her hand over the receiver. "The secretary's putting me through." But when the secretary returned to the phone, she explained the reverend's wife had been called out of town unexpectedly and wouldn't return until late Saturday evening.

There would be no visit with Sharon. My father and I sneaked a smile at each other.

But here I was in the parking lot of the church, moments away from a reunion with the person who had less use for me than Jonquil Putnam did.

In spite of myself, I liked the church at once. A stone-paved walkway cut a winding path through a thick green lawn. The quaint old building was pristine white with arched stained-glass windows, a tall steeple, and an iron bell. A sign by the front steps read: *First Episcopal Church, Maplewood. Dr. Sherman Cheswick, Rector.*

The usher at the door greeted me, glanced at my eye, and offered me the weekly bulletin. “Welcome. If you’re new to our church, you might also want one of these.” He reached for a brochure from a wooden rack on the wall. “This gives the details about our stained-glass windows. People come from all over to see them.” I thanked him and walked halfway down the middle aisle which separated the two sections of pews. From a central location, I reasoned, I could locate Sharon quickly, hurry to her after the service, say a quick hello, and leave.

I chose a seat on the right and sat down near the end of the row. The morning sun gleamed through the colored glass, filling the quiet room with rich reds, restful blues, and luscious greens. I opened the brochure and read:

On the eastern wall, the lives of King David and his son Solomon are presented in eight separate scenes. Beginning with David as a shepherd tending his flock, the viewer can follow David’s life through his slaying of Goliath, his flight from King Saul, and his reign over Israel.

I leaned forward to study the panes. The usher was right—these were inspiring works of art, well worth the drive to Maplewood.

There was David with a lamb in his arms, resting by a blue stream. Next was David, the young warrior, standing over the giant’s severed head, the blood, ruby red, coursing across the sand. As I turned to look over my shoulder at the next scene, the organist began a Bach prelude. The melody resonated through the building, echoed from the cedar-timbered ceiling, and swept me up a calming embrace. I hadn’t expected such joy—not here. Maybe this *would* be a good way to start the week. I relaxed against the royal-blue seat cushions and closed my eyes.

And then—the most astonishing thing happened.

For the first time since the day I thought I killed Jameson Bridger in the library, Lyda Rose, long banished from my thoughts, appeared, unsummoned, in my mind. A scene played out before me, effortlessly, spilling from my imagination as if I were watching a play. I grabbed a pen from my purse and began writing in the edges of the brochure.

Lyda Rose knelt in the cathedral and stared up at the great window. She’d come there to rest—to remember the courage of the warrior kings who had come before her. Ever since King Jardon’s untimely death, she’d been running for her life.

“Excuse me.”

Everyone in the realm, noble and commoner alike, knew she was the rightful heir to the throne. But Romar, the king’s minister, was plotting ...

“Excuse me.”

... to place his weak-willed nephew on the throne.

Someone behind me tapped my shoulder. I stopped writing and turned around. He pointed to a woman in a gray dress standing at the end of my row. A large red silk rose adorned her shoulder.

I turned to her. “Me?”

She scowled. “Yes. You’re in my seat.”

“Oh. I didn’t know there was reserved seating in churches.”

She pointed to the gold-plated tag bolted to the arm of the pew. “See here? My family bought this pew ninety years ago.”

“You own this pew?”

“Yes—and that window.” She pointed to young David with dead Goliath.

In former days, before Ferguson Trask, Rufus Plumley, and Ryder Ellershaw, I would’ve deferred to my social superior, muttered apologies, and stumbled over my own feet as I retreated.

But not today.

Still weary, on edge, dreading my prospects, and impatient to get back to my story, I remained where I was. The prelude surged toward a crescendo. I squinted at the window for several moments and then turned back to the Lady in Gray.

“Which window is yours?” I asked.

My feigned stupidity achieved the desired effect.

She pursed her lips and stabbed the air with such vigor the red rose fluttered on her shoulder. “*That* one,” she said, “at the end of *this* row. See the family name in the inscription?”

Again I perused the window and turned back to her. “I’m sorry,” I said, “but the sun is so bright, I couldn’t quite make out the words. Your name is Goliath?”

Her eyes flamed. Her nostrils flared as she drew in a lungful of air. She squared her shoulders and marched up the aisle to the lobby to fetch an usher, I supposed, or maybe a policeman. I stepped over the people next to me and sauntered down the middle aisle to an empty spot several rows ahead on the opposite side of the room.

I slipped into place as the song leader announced the first hymn, “Rescue the Perishing.” An elderly gentleman offered me his hymnal. I accepted his kindness, but did not sing. Instead I scanned the room for Sharon. There she was in the front row. She was wearing a long-sleeved pale-turquoise dress, her

blonde hair pulled back in a French twist. When the song ended, she turned to whisper to the woman next to her.

I nearly dropped the hymnbook. It was Trixie Thorpe.

Half sick, I sat down. The Lady in Gray was still fuming behind me, and my two worst enemies were conspiring in front of me. The rector stepped to the pulpit and asked visitors to raise their hands and be recognized. I did not comply. I clutched my papers and pen in my hand, hugged my purse, and remained seated as the congregation stood to greet each other.

“Hello, Agnes.”

A strange little woman, standing in the aisle, held out her hand to me. Her silver hair, piled on her head in a mass of tangles and loose ends, was held in place by a bright pink hat. Round, gold-rimmed glasses perched on the end of her nose. Dressed in black, she’d draped a crocheted shawl, made of variegated red, blue, green, and yellow yarn, around her pudgy shoulders and fastened the ends in place with a large dragonfly brooch. Her apparel and impish grin were unsettling enough, but what she said next downright alarmed me.

“Could you wait for me after church, dear? I need a ride home.”

Without saying more, she patted my arm and hurried away. I watched her shuffle across the aisle and scoot in a few rows ahead of me. Dr. Cheswick stepped to the pulpit and began his sermon. Though I had every intention of disliking him—he was, after all, Sharon’s husband—I was grateful to have someplace to fix my gaze so I could avoid making eye contact with the Woman in Black who turned around every few minutes to look at me.

Wilkie Brooker wasn’t so distant a memory that I could cope with another mysterious stranger in my life.

As if on cue, clouds obscured the sun, shadowed the room, and dimmed the windows’ luster. The organ was silent. Only Sherman Cheswick’s pompous tone shattered the stillness, firing like a cannon from the pulpit, searing the air as it exploded up the aisle and ricocheted off the front door to shower embers on our heads. And all the while, the Woman in Black turned and stared, nodding at me. I bowed my head and placed my hand over my eyes as if in contrition. Maybe if she thought I was praying, she’d leave me alone.

I peeked at her through the space between my fingers. Her back was to me now, and she was rummaging through something in her lap. When she turned around again and found me still “in prayer,” she tried another approach.

“Pssst.”

I didn’t respond.

“PS—SS—SS—TT.”

The elderly gentleman nudged me. I looked up. The Woman in Black had positioned a photo on her shoulder. She pointed first to the image and then to herself and mouthed words I could not possibly interpret.

Dr. Cheswick concluded his sermon. When he said, “Let us pray,” I thought of making a run for the parking lot. But the threat of having to return next Sunday kept me in place through the final “Amen.” The organist began the postlude; the Woman in Black, still smiling, motioned for me to wait. She shoved past everyone in her path, jostling them in her effort to reach the middle aisle and cross over to me. I ignored her, pushed toward the side aisle, and hurried toward the front. A quick hello, and I would be out of there.

I reached the first row of the church where Sharon was holding court with the church members. I stood quietly until she turned around.

She extended her hand. “Aa-aa-gnes. Mother told me you might be visiting. I think you know Mrs. Thorpe.”

“Oh, dear,” Trixie said. “You look worse than I imagined. How dreadful. You’re surely not coming back to school tomorrow. You’ll frighten your students to death.”

“As a matter of fact I am coming back,” I said. I felt my face growing hot as the two vixens stared at me.

“I was so surprised when my mother told me you were teaching at Brighton Park,” Sharon said. “I still remember how amazed I was when I found out you’d gone to college.”

“How ironic,” I said. “I remember how pleased I was when *you* went to college.”

Trixie chimed in. “And to think—now you’ll be teaching in the same school.”

My jaw dropped. “What?”

Trixie looked at Sharon and then at me. “The home economics teacher is on maternity leave. Mrs. Merriman-Cheswick is going to fill in for her this term.”

“There you are, Agnes. I thought you’d left.” The Woman in Black had found me. She forced her way between Sharon and Trixie, snagging the fringe of her shawl on the pearl buttons of Sharon’s sleeve.

Sharon grimaced and yanked back her arm as if fending off contamination. The dragonfly brooch unhinged. The shawl slipped from the woman's shoulders and scraped along the floor as Sharon tried to shake loose. Trixie stepped in, snatched the shawl, and swung her arm in a wide arc like a matador taunting a bull. A long strand of green yarn, looped around the button, unraveled as Trixie pulled.

"Careful." The Woman in Black had tears in her eyes. "I just finished that yesterday. It's the first time I've worn it."

Without thinking, I grabbed Trixie's arm. "Stop," I said. "You're getting all worked up over nothing. Be still, Sharon."

Everyone halted. I held Sharon's wrist in one hand and carefully untwisted the yarn from the button. I returned the shawl to its owner, who thanked me and tried to poke the loose thread back through the weaving.

The four of us might have parted without further incident if only Reverend Cheswick hadn't descended on us in a fury, his burgundy robe flapping behind him as he approached.

The Woman in Black turned to face him, the green thread dangling from her hand.

Sharon, nervous, spoke first. "Sherman, you know Mrs. Thorpe, and this is—"

He held up his hand and addressed the Woman in Black. "Flossie, I've *told* you not to interrupt my sermons. I will *not* tolerate this behavior any longer. *Every* Sunday you make some kind of commotion and distract the members."

Flossie's tears flowed faster. "I was just trying to get Agnes' attention."

Sharon interrupted. "How do you know Agnes?"

Flossie pushed her glasses up on her nose. "She and my son are friends."

"Agnes? And *your* son?" Sharon said. She was pleased, but I didn't know why.

I turned to Flossie. "You must have me confused with someone else. We've never met, and I have no idea who your son is."

Flossie brushed away her tears with her fingertips and tilted her head back to look at me through her glasses. "That's right. We've never met, but you know my son, Warner. He said you admired my flowers." She turned back to the rector. "I thought Agnes might give me a ride home so I wouldn't have to take the bus. That's why I was trying to get her attention."

Sherman was unmoved. "You could have done that *after* the service. I could hear your hissing all the way to the pulpit."

Chapter 9 ~ A Loose Thread

Flossie kept fumbling with her repairs. “But she didn’t know who I was and had no reason to wait. That’s why I was trying to show her Warner’s picture, but she wouldn’t look up.”

“You’re Warner’s mother?” I said.

She smiled. “I am. And I was so glad when he told me you two were friends. I’ve wished for the longest time that he could find a nice girl like you to marry.”

Sharon beamed. “Oh, how nice. Does your mother know, Agnes?”

Trixie joined in. “Wait till I tell Mavis you have a boyfriend. Does Jonas know?”

“Jonas?” Sharon said.

“A coworker of ours,” Trixie said. “He and Agnes have been getting to know each other.”

Sharon laid her hand on my arm. “Oh, how nice. I remember your mother’s being frantic you’d never find a husband. And now *two* men are pursuing you. This is good news.”

Sherman was not to be ignored. “This is all very interesting, Flossie, but—”

“Reverend. Reverend.” The Lady in Gray had swept in from the rear. She pointed at me, her long fingernails swiping the air like a dragon’s claws. “This person was in my seat this morning and refused to move, though I asked her very nicely. If she’s a friend of yours, I’m going to have to ask that—”

Sherman turned white to the lips. “No, Mrs. Wimpley. I’ve never seen her till now.”

Sharon and Trixie exchanged smiles.

“I apologize,” I said, “but you can surely appreciate that it’s impossible for a newcomer to be aware of your unwritten protocol. Perhaps you could post a list of rules in the foyer.” I took Flossie’s shawl, placed it back on her shoulders, and looked the rector square in the eye. “Be sure to add ‘love thy neighbor’ to the list.”

Had she been armed with a sharp instrument, Mrs. Wimpley would have skewered me on the spot.

“See what I mean?” she said. “We don’t need people like her in this church.”

Sherman, hoarse with fear, barely whispered. “It won’t happen again, Mrs. Wimpley.”

“No, it won’t,” I said, “because I won’t be back. I came only as a favor to my mother. She regretted not seeing Sharon when she was visiting while I was in the hospital.”

“Oh, well,” Sharon said, “I had too much to do to fit your mother into my schedule.”

“Schedule?” I said. “Your husband’s secretary said you were out of town.”

She laughed. “Well, I was. I was in Plainview meeting with Mrs. Thorpe.”

My head was throbbing. “My mother tried for days to call you.”

“I know,” Sharon said, “but once she starts talking, she doesn’t know when to stop. You, of all people, should know how she is.”

I was quivering with rage. My throat went dry and beads of sweat seeped out on my forehead. My knees wobbled. I was raising my arm to slap the smug expression off Sharon’s beautiful face, when I felt Flossie’s soft hand clasping mine.

And then my course of action appeared to me like a vision.

I turned to Trixie. “Mrs. Thorpe, I’ll be too busy to see you tomorrow, but I hope you’ll give Mavis my regards.”

I tugged on the sleeve of the rector’s robe. “Don’t worry, Sherm. I know you’re afraid Mrs. Goliath here is going to take her donations somewhere else if you don’t keep toeing the line. But she won’t. She loves being a big fish in this little pond.”

And then I locked my eyes on Sharon’s. “I’ll tell my mother I saw you today, Sharon, and that you haven’t changed a bit. Come on, Flossie. I’ll treat you to lunch on the way home. I know just the place.”

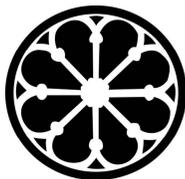
We started toward the door. When we were halfway up the aisle, I stopped, turned around, and called out in the loudest voice I could manage, “Oh, Mrs. Merriman-Cheswick—”

The chatter ceased as everyone still mingling in the sanctuary looked in my direction.

I enunciated slowly and distinctly, savoring my words. “One more thing. I forgot to tell you. Your mother just got home from visiting your brother in prison. He’s fine, by the way. Sends you his love.”

And with that parting shot, Flossie and I strolled from the room.

Chapter 10



A Knock at the Door

From across our table at Bob’s Pancake World, I studied Flossie Bingham as she gobbled down the last of her roast beef and mashed potatoes. She had a chaotic beauty all her own—like an overgrown, ramshackle yard where roses peek through a white picket fence in front, sunflowers climb up a tool shed in back, and morning glories droop from wire strung between aluminum poles on either side.

She slid a biscuit around her plate to soak up the last of the gravy and peeked over her glasses. “Thank you,” she said.

“You’re welcome. It’s been a long time since I ate a real Sunday dinner.”

She snagged the last green bean with her fingers and popped it in her mouth. “I don’t mean just the dinner—I mean ‘thank you’ for standing up for me with those ladies.”

“You’re welcome, but I wouldn’t call them ladies.”

Our server returned. “Dessert today?”

Flossie’s eyes twinkled.

I ordered cobbler and coffee for both of us. Flossie took her mirror from her purse and rubbed her finger over her front teeth. “I shouldn’t eat corn on the cob.” She tugged at a piece of corn silk till she pulled it loose.

“Tell me, Flossie, why do you ride a bus so far to church—especially that one?”

“We used to live in Maplewood, and it was the closest church to our house. I don’t make friends very easy, so I hate to change churches this late in the game.”

When the cobbler arrived, she lifted the dish to her face and inhaled deeply. A tiny drop of glaze stuck to the tip of her nose and remained. We welcomed the soft peaches to our taste buds, let the warm crust linger in our mouths, and eased into that comfortable kind of stupor that follows a busy morning and a midday meal. I was glad to delay the call I expected from my mother when I got home.

Flossie tilted her head back and slurped the final drop from her coffee cup. She smacked her lips and then set the mug in the dessert bowl. She leaned back in her chair, folded her hands across her stomach, ducked her chin, and peeked over her glasses at me.

“How long have you known the reverend’s wife?”

“My whole life,” I said. “They lived in the house across the street from us.”

She tilted her head to one side and furrowed her brow. “Then, why would she treat your mother that way?”

“Because that’s what Sharon does.”

Flossie leaned across the table and laid her hand on mine. “You must never tell your mother what Sharon said about her. You know that, don’t you?”

“I think she deserves to know—”

“No, you don’t. You think it’ll make you feel better to get back at Sharon.”

“Yes. It would.”

She shook her head. “It won’t. It will only hurt your mother and cause a rift between her and her best friend. Is that what you want?”

Dear, gentle Flossie, I thought, you’re a lady from the top of your pink hat to the bottom of your thrift store shoes—shoes Sharon Merriman-Cheswick isn’t fit to shine.

Flossie dozed on the way home. I nudged her gently when we pulled up to her apartment. Before she got out of the car, she squeezed my hand.

“Would you like to have an afghan for your sofa? I got the nicest magenta yarn on sale.”

I did not want an afghan, much less one woven from magenta yarn, but I knew this was her way of thanking me.

“I’d love to have one,” I said, “but there’s no rush.”

When she reached her front door, she turned around and gave me a thumbs up. I had a feeling this signal meant she was headed straight for her knitting basket.

Chapter 10 ~ A Knock at the Door

As I entered my apartment, the phone rang. I braced myself and picked up the receiver. “Hello?”

“Where have you been?”

I hadn’t heard that edge in my mother’s voice since I threw a rock through the bathroom window of the high school gym.

“I went to church like you told me to.”

She was hoarse with rage. “Church was over a long time ago. I’ve been trying to call for hours. Do you know what you’ve done?”

“A good deed.”

“What do you mean—good deed?”

“I ran into one of my neighbors at church. She asked me for a ride because she didn’t have enough money for bus fare. So I brought her home. We stopped and had lunch.”

“And you think that somehow *atones* for what you did to Sharon?”

“Do I need atonement?” I asked.

“Don’t play dumb with me, Agnes. How could you do something so despicable—blurting out in front of the *entire church* about Roger? I *told* you not to bring it up.”

“It wasn’t in front of the entire church. The place was practically empty. There couldn’t have been more than thirty people left.”

She held her ground. “Jewel said you were standing in the lobby and yelled all the way to the front of the building.”

Saturn pawed at my shoe. I reached down to scratch his head.

“Not true. I was only halfway to the door when I remembered what I wanted to say.”

And then my mild-mannered, soft-hearted mother came the nearest to screaming at me I’d ever remembered.

“Sharon told Jewel their phone’s been ringing ever since they got home. They finally had to take it off the hook.”

“That’s nothing new,” I said. “They don’t answer their phone anyway, as you’ll recall. Besides that, the maid can get it.”

“The maid doesn’t work on Sundays.”

“How unfortunate,” I said. “Sharon might actually have to get up off her—”

“Now you listen to me, Agnes. You’re going to call Sharon and apologize, and I mean it.”

“I am not.”

“Don’t use that tone with me.”

Trevorode the Defender

“If you knew what she said, Mom, you’d understand.”

“Understand what?”

Flossie’s gentle warning still fresh in my mind, I paused. “Understand ... what she did to Flossie.”

“Who’s Flossie?” she asked.

“My neighbor. When she came to find me, Sharon and Trixie—”

“Who’s Trixie?” My mother was near hysteria.

“She’s a teacher at my school. She and Sharon—”

“Never mind. When we hang up this phone, you call Sharon and tell her you’re sorry. You can *never* make up for what you did, but at least I can tell Jewel you tried.”

And then—my own mother hung up on me.

I walked to the kitchen, filled Saturn’s dish with food, and then sank down on the sofa. If every week turned out like this one, it was going to be a long, brutal year.

Saturn finished lunch and hopped on my lap. We curled up on the sofa and drifted off into a well-deserved nap. I dreamed of Lyda Rose. I woke with a start, hurried to my desk, and began to type.

Lyda Rose beckoned Grimwulf to approach. He bowed.

“Queen Bittershaft is moving her forces across our western border, My Lady,” he said. “Someone must ride by night to bring Trevorode to our aid, or all will be lost.”

I typed for two glorious hours before the phone rang.

“Did you call Sharon yet?”

Lost in the woods bordering Grimsdale Manor, I couldn’t quite make sense of what my mother was saying. “No, I’ve been working on ... schoolwork all afternoon.”

“I told you to call her.”

“I know, but I’m busy and I’m sure the last person on the planet she wants to hear from this afternoon is me. I’ll see her at school in the morning and tell her then.”

“I don’t know why this is such an issue, Agnes.”

“I don’t either.”

She hung up again.

I went back to work.

Exhausted from her journey, Lyda Rose reached the edge of the forest. The dark moor stretched out before her. She sat down to rest by the ancient Stone of Wulfgar and ate bread and cheese. A dragon of fearsome portent appeared out

Chapter 10 ~ A Knock at the Door

of the fog. He reared his head and sniffed the air. Moonlight glistened on his gray scales, and scarlet blood dripped from a gaping wound on his shoulder. Lyda Rose stood and drew her sword.

The dragon approached. He called out, "Excuse me. You're in my seat."

I leaned back in my chair, read the sentence aloud, and laughed so hard I had to wipe tears off my chin.

The day had ended well.

I took a long bath and went to bed.

As I had the week before, I woke early on Monday morning and left in plenty of time to stop by the Drifters' Rest. But when I pulled into the parking lot and saw Ryder Ellershaw through the window, I didn't get out of my car.

When I arrived at Brighton Park just after dawn, I was glad to find Jonas already there, parked in his usual place and still sitting in his truck. I pulled into the same space I'd used the week before, got out of my car, and walked around to the driver's side of his truck. He was leafing through a pile of papers propped on the steering wheel.

He rolled down his window. "Good morning. Feeling better?"

"I think so."

"Get in. You can wait with me."

Before I opened his passenger door, I reached down and ran my fingertips over the logo again and wondered if the tiny bits of paint, still tangible, might reveal some secret.

I climbed into the passenger seat.

He didn't look up from his reading. "Ready to try again?"

I laughed. "Yeah. Over the weekend I took some time to think."

He kept reading. "Thinking is always good. It's a shame people don't try it more often. Come to any conclusions?"

I nodded my head. "First of all, I'm going to—"

He looked out his windshield. "You'll have to hold that thought, Agnes. There's something I need to take care of." He pointed to a man coming toward us, then straightened the pages and placed them in a large manila envelope. When he turned it over, I read the return address: *Camden, Lockwood, Osgood, & Tuttle, Attorneys at Law.*

I pointed to the envelope. "Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"I've been in some kind of trouble a long time." He opened his door. "Care to join me?"

I got out of the truck and stepped onto the sidewalk as Wilkie Brooker reached us. He was wearing the same clothes he'd worn to my apartment.

Brooker smacked his hand on the hood of Jonas' truck. "When are you gonna get rid of this old clunker, anyway?"

Silent and stoic, Jonas held out the envelope.

Brooker laid it on the hood of the truck, removed the contents, and shuffled through them. "Signed, sealed, and delivered?"

"No. Tell Mrs. Pillburn I'm not ready to make a decision."

"She's not going to like that."

"I stopped caring about *that* a long time ago."

Brooker smirked. "Mind if I quote you?"

"Tell her anything you like."

Brooker didn't seem to notice Jonas was quivering with suppressed rage.

Brooker stacked the document on top of the envelope and tucked the whole pile under his arm. "Okay, but you probably haven't heard the last of her ... or of me."

And then like a sleek cat pouncing on a rat, Jonas grabbed Brooker by his wrinkled lapels and shoved him into the truck. He tilted Brooker backward until his greasy head lay flat on the hood and his scuffed shoes lifted off the sidewalk. The papers slipped out of his grasp and scattered.

Jonas, nose to nose with him, clenched his jaw and spoke in a low tone. "Now you listen to me. I've had enough of you and your second-rate tactics and bullying. You go back to Olympia Pillburn and tell her if I were starving in the street, I would die in the gutter before I sell my interest in that property."

Jonas pulled Brooker upright and stepped back. Brooker, wide-eyed and sweating, made a feeble effort at reclaiming his dignity.

"I don't know what the fuss is over that old rattle-trap house anyway. Doesn't look to me like it's worth the powder it would take to blow it up."

"That could be said about a lot of us," Jonas said. "And now, if you'll excuse me, I have a class to teach."

After Jonas left, Brooker knelt on the pavement to reach for the papers that had fluttered under the truck. I scooped up the stray papers near me and resisted the urge to slip away to a secluded place to read them. Brooker lumbered up from the ground. I held the pages out to him.

He took his dingy handkerchief from his pocket. "Thanks. Could you hold on to those for just a second?"

I was watching Brooker wipe sweat from his face and feeling a twinge of pity for him, when out of the corner of my eye I saw a small square of white by my left front tire. I picked it up. The moment my fingers felt the smooth

finish on the other side, I knew it was a photograph. I glanced at the inscription on the back, written with a woman's delicate handwriting: *Magnolia Arms*. Before I had time to turn it over, Brooker called to me.

"Is that mine?"

I dropped my hand to my side and eased it behind my back. "No, I dropped this when I got out of my car. Parking ticket." I unlocked my car and laid the photo face down on the seat.

Brooker approached. "Look, Miss—"

"Quinn." I closed my door.

"Yeah. Look—try to talk some sense into your friend, would you?"

"Mr. Brooker, of all the people I've ever met, Jonas Grinstead is by far the most sensible of all of them."

"Whatever you say. I just hope I never see this miserable campus again."

"That makes two of us." I opened my car door and slid the photo, face down, into my British literature book and then turned to face Brooker.

"Sure you have everything?" I asked.

He wiped his face again. "I think so."

"Then do us all a favor and go home."

Books in hand, I rambled through the vacant halls, piecing together the fragments of the story. But, like a jigsaw puzzle too long in a musty attic, the pieces did not fit easily into place. *Rattle-trap house*—Brooker must've meant the *Magnolia Arms*. This was the property Jonas refused to sell. When I'd asked Jonas about the logo on his truck, he'd said it was the *place he'd built*. The drawing on his truck must've been a magnolia tree. But why had Jonas left? Was that where he'd met the "only woman" he'd ever loved—the one Muriel had mentioned?

And *who* was Olympia Pillburn?

Worried Brooker might reappear, I locked the door of my classroom behind me and sat down at my desk. I took out the photo and turned it over.

And there was the house Jonas Grinstead had built.

A high-pitched gray shingled roof topped three stories of pale yellow walls. Tall, full-paned windows framed with gleaming white casements lined the lower two floors. Smaller gabled windows circled the third. A widow's walk sat atop a splendid cupola adorned with an arched stained-glass window. Four wide steps led up to a spacious columned porch which ran the length of the house—a house so beautiful a thousand lifetimes lived within its walls would be too few.

One look—and I was convinced if I could walk through that front door, I'd feel like I'd come home, back to the place I belonged. I'd greet people I'd never met, but they would not object when I climbed the stairs to claim the room with the stained-glass window under the topmost gable. I'd join those people at the long table in the high-ceilinged dining room. We'd linger over a sumptuous meal and listen to each other's petty concerns. The kitchen would smell of apples and vanilla, and there would always be a pot of fresh-brewed tea and clean china cups.

There would be an old upright piano in the sitting room and sometimes someone would play it and someone else would sing and ladies who walked with canes would get up and dance in a makeshift chorus line and say they hoped no one was looking through the window. And then they'd all laugh so hard they'd fall down on the faded blue-striped sofa and say, "Agnes, are there any teacakes left?" And I would wander off to the kitchen and bring them back a plateful, but they'd already be dozing, worn out from their dancing.

An insistent knocking tumbled me back into the hostile world of Brighton Park. I stashed the photo in my book and made a lunge for the door, colliding with the corner of my desk in the process. Limping, I called to the students stranded in the hallway. "Sorry, I guess I forgot—"

Still bent over, rubbing my aching knee, I fumbled with the lock and opened the door.

There stood Beatrix Thorpe, her face compressed with contempt.

I stared at her bony legs sticking out below the pleats of her red skirt. I looked up at her white cashmere sweater and double string of pearls. Her recently dyed red hair and red-framed glasses completed the look of a skinny old hen preening in the barnyard, so I wasn't all that surprised when she pulled back her shoulders, stuck out her chin, and began to squawk.

"Do you realize you're *stealing*?"

She must have spotted me with Brooker and followed me as I crept down the hall like a common thief.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked.

Her jaw clenched and lips pursed, she pointed to the clock on the wall and enunciated as if practicing a diction exercise. "*Eight. Oh. Two.* You've kept your students standing out here in the hall for *two* minutes of time their tuition dollars have already paid for."

She pressed against the door; I resisted.

"I'm sorry. This is my first day back after my accident—"

Her thin fingers turned white as she pushed harder. “I’m getting a little *tired* of your talking about your *accident*. You appeared to be in *perfect* health when I saw you *yesterday*.” She glanced over her shoulder at someone in the hall and softened her tone to a semblance of civility. “Now let’s keep our doors unlocked, shall we, so our students can get full value for their dollar.” She stepped back. “Besides that—it’s against the fire code.” She smiled and swished away, her red high heels clicking on the terrazzo floor.

When I pulled the door open, Exton Wrayburn stepped in.

“Sorry, Miss Quinn. That was for my benefit. Mrs. Thorpe seems to think I report to my grandmother every night.”

The students filed in as I hobbled to my desk. “Well, that explains her—” I took a deep breath. “Never mind.”

Exton sat down near the front and took out his books. “Everybody knows how she is. I signed up for one of her classes once, but dropped it after two weeks. Are you feeling better?”

I brought my notes to the lectern. “Yes, I think so. At least I did when I got here.”

For the next three hours, students swept in and flowed out like a recurring tide. Whether or not my bruised eye earned their polite attention, I couldn’t guess. But even those who had appeared skeptical the week before, when I’d introduced Saxon village life, listened with genuine interest as I read aloud Beowulf’s battle with Grendel. There’s something about sinews snapping and bones breaking that sways any audience.

A boy nicknamed “Big Tony” stopped by my desk on his way out. “I like that story.”

I looked up at him. “Have you read a classic before?”

“No. I never saw much point in reading made-up stories, but I like this one.” He tapped on his temple. “I could see the whole thing in my head while you were reading.”

I peeked in the front my book to make sure the photo was still there, closed my book bag, and picked up my keys off the desk. “I’ve got good news for you. There are two monsters left, and they’re worse than Grendel. One of them breathes fire.”

I ventured out to find Sharon. Though I could’ve easily asked Trixie where to find her, I headed toward the administration building instead where I found a perky blonde stationed at the information desk. She directed me to Building E. I located Sharon’s classroom and stood outside the open door the few remaining minutes of her class. If I hadn’t known her, I would have been

impressed. There was no denying she was beautiful and accomplished. I ambled in after the students filed out.

“Hello, Sharon.”

She glanced over at me and returned to her work. “Agnes.”

I stepped closer. “Look, Sharon, I got a little out of hand yesterday, and I’m sorry.”

“Is that all you have to say?”

“I think so,” I said. “I hope I didn’t cause too much trouble with your church members.”

Her voice was glacial. “No, you didn’t cause any trouble. I explained to them what a miserable person you’ve always been.”

With memories of Beowulf still clanging through my mind, I opened my mouth to slay Sharon verbally, but stopped. I had loftier goals to pursue. I wasn’t going to distract myself by prolonging an endless cycle of Sharon’s tattling to her mother and my mother’s badgering me over the phone.

When I reached the door, I turned to face her. “Well then, I guess we’ll have to leave the great mystery unsolved.”

“What’s that?”

“Which of us loathes the other more.”

My next class wasn’t until four. My own office, a musty, windowless room in a portable building, was ridiculously far removed from the central core of the campus. I’d already determined to spend as little time there as possible. I made my way to the library and stopped by Elinor’s office to say hello. She seemed bewildered to see me.

“Agnes, what are you doing here? Is the luncheon over already?” She rummaged through papers on her desk. “I thought it would last at least an hour and a half—maybe longer.”

“Luncheon?”

“The English Department luncheon, the first of the school year. That British poet, Glynis Sudbury, was scheduled to speak. I thought you told me she was one of your favorites.”

She scanned the room and then moved to the file cabinet, where she attacked another pile of papers sitting on top.

I pulled out my planner and flipped through the pages.

“No. That meeting is scheduled for a week from today.”

She didn’t look up. “It was *originally* scheduled a week from today, but Sudbury’s mother is ill. Her publicist asked to move things up a week so she

could go home early. Trixie notified everyone of the change. Didn't you get the memo?"

"No, I didn't get the memo. I was in the hospital."

"Yes, I know, but Trixie should've called you."

In a moment all the pieces fell into place. I settled in a chair across from Elinor's desk. "I've gone and done it now," I said.

"What's that, dear?"

Elinor, distracted, spoke more into the air than to me. She grabbed a cardboard box, dumped its contents on the floor, and plunked it down next to the filing cabinet. One by one, she picked up a folder from the pile she was working on, gave it a quick once-over, and tossed it into the waiting box.

I stared at a photo of Robert Scott on the wall. "Maybe Trixie *would* have told me about the luncheon yesterday if I hadn't insulted Sharon."

Elinor opened the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet and dropped in a folder. "Sharon?"

"Trixie's friend." The latest evidence of Trixie's malice woke the dormant resentments I'd been nursing. "I mean ... I *expected* to have a crummy schedule. First-year teachers are always at the bottom of the food chain. Three classes early in the morning and the next one not till four ... and don't even get me *started* on my Tuesday/Thursday schedule."

"It can't be replaced," Elinor said as papers fluttered to the floor.

"—and okay, so maybe I don't deserve an office bigger than a closet, but couldn't I at least have a window? I feel like I'm in a cell."

Elinor kicked the bottom file drawer closed. "On interlibrary loan and from my own alma mater—what could be worse?"

"But to deprive me of a professional opportunity—is that even ethical?"

Elinor hurried toward her bookcase and lifted a heap of magazines from the bottom shelf. "How can I possibly explain?"

"I don't think rudeness like Trixie's *can* be explained," I said.

The magazines fell from Elinor's hands. She leaned her head against the bookcase and began to sob. "I'll be ruined. I can't file another report saying I've lost something else."

For the first time since our pinball conversation began, I intersected with Elinor. I took her by the elbow and guided her to her desk. She slumped into her chair. Her face was pale, eyes vacant. I handed her a tissue from the box on the corner of the desk and then knelt down to gather the magazines scattered on the floor.

"What do you mean ... you've lost something else?" I asked.

She dabbed at her eyes and wiped her nose. "I keep misplacing things. Something goes missing almost every day. It's one thing if it's a pen or a pair of scissors, but now"

I walked back to my chair and sat down to face her. "Now what?"

"The History Department chair wanted a manuscript from the University of Florida, a Civil War diary. It arrived yesterday, but now I can't find it anywhere."

I handed her another tissue. "It has to be here somewhere. I have a long time till my next class. I'll stay and help you look."

She shook her head. "You don't understand. It isn't the first time this has happened. I'm afraid I'm losing my mind. What good is a librarian who can't keep track of books?"

I stood. "Now, you get that thought right out of your head. You have a lot of responsibility and not enough help. Let's start looking."

We scoured the library for the missing diary. Elinor was even more upset when we failed.

After my last class in remedial grammar and composition, I drove to the Drifters' Rest.

Muriel set a menu in front of me. "I'd say 'you look like something the cat dragged in,' but I don't think that's what you need to hear."

I handed the menu back to her. "Bring me the soup of the day and a glass of tea."

"Leave everything to me," she said. "I know exactly what you need."

Muriel returned with a steaming bowl of creamy potato soup garnished with grated cheese and crumbled bacon, a chicken salad sandwich, and a fruit plate with honeydew melon, mandarin oranges, and cherries.

She stood back and crossed her arms as she admired the meal.

"I always serve something colorful with potato soup. It's nutritious, but lackluster."

I dipped my spoon in the bowl and closed my eyes as I breathed in the wonderful smell. Then I ate a spoonful of what could only be described as *Heaven in Your Mouth*.

The concerns of the day faded. "It's delicious," I said.

"My mother's recipe," Muriel said.

I lingered, requested extra cheese, and found my iced tea glass was never empty. Too full for dessert, I asked for the check.

"No charge," Muriel said.

Chapter 10 ~ A Knock at the Door

I leaned back in my chair. “Look, I appreciate your taking care of me when I came home from the hospital, but you’re running a business here. I can’t take free food forever.”

“Your dinner has already been paid for from the account opened in your name. Your credit should last through, oh ... I guess about May ... if you keep eating sensibly.”

“Credit? You’re making that up.”

Muriel cleared the table. “No. It’s the truth.”

I laid a twenty-dollar bill on the table. “Who would do such a thing? You and Jonas are my only friends, and neither of you has money to spare.”

She picked up the twenty and returned it. “For your information, it wasn’t Jonas or me.”

I followed her toward the kitchen. “Then who?”

“I’m not supposed to tell.” The kitchen door closed behind her.

I waited by the counter till she returned. “You have to tell me. I won’t be able to sleep.”

She stepped behind the counter. “Coffee to go?”

I nodded. She filled the cup.

“He was grateful you didn’t file charges,” Muriel said.

Ryder Ellershaw.

It was after seven by the time I arrived at home. Saturn, miffed at being left alone for twelve hours, remained by the pantry till I retrieved the cat food.

My mother called at seven thirty. I squeaked out a weak hello.

Her voice exploded through the receiver. “*Which of us loathes the other more?* You call *that* an apology?”

“She called me a ‘miserable person.’ I lost what little patience I had left.”

She was unsympathetic. “Now you listen to me. You’re going back to that school tomorrow and you’re going to find Sharon and—”

A knock at the door spared me.

“I have to go. Someone’s at the door. Don’t worry, I won’t insult Sharon again. She’ll finish her substitute teaching and go home to her husband, and that will be the end of it.”

“I’m not through talking about this, Agnes.”

“Okay, Mom. I gotta go. Bye.”

I opened the door to find Flossie, afghan in hand, beaming at me.

“Hello, Agnes. I’m almost finished, but I wanted to try it on the back of your sofa first.”

“Maybe another time,” I said. “I have a lot of grading—”

Before I could close the door, she stepped inside. “Oh, how cozy. I wish Warner would let me put pictures on our walls, but he doesn’t want to mess up the paint.”

Flossie draped the afghan over the sofa, tugged, smoothed, pulled, and straightened the edges, and then stood back, like Michelangelo, to survey the effect. Without her pink Sunday hat, her hair fluffed out in all directions.

I stood in the doorway of the kitchen. “Looks like that’s about right,” I said, “but you didn’t need to go to all that trouble.”

She walked around the sofa, sat down, and eased her shoulders into the magenta folds. “Don’t you just love the feel of knitted yarn?”

“I’ve never given it much thought.” I appreciated Flossie’s sparing me from a lengthy conversation with my mother, but I was too tired to entertain her. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll make my lunch for tomorrow. I never have time in the morning.”

I thought she might get the hint, but she stayed where she was.

“That’s fine, dear. You go right ahead.”

I took the loaf of bread from the pantry and called to Flossie from the kitchen as I worked. “That was my mother on the phone. I took your advice and didn’t tell her what Sharon said about her. Of course, now she’s mad at me instead of being mad at Sharon, but at least her feelings aren’t hurt.” I put my lunch in the refrigerator. “I guess you were right—” I added as I stepped to the kitchen door, but my remarks had gone unheeded.

Flossie Bingham was snoring.