

Chaos in Fool's Hill

By Jane McFann

Chapter One

Just when I thought my life was going to sail smoothly along, it hit a major pothole.

Yes, I knew that was a majorly mixed metaphor, but that was how it felt. I suppose that a body of water could have the equivalent of a pothole – maybe a rip current or an eddy, but that didn't seem quite jolting enough.

One minute I was at the tail end of the opening night party for a new business in Fool's Hill, Delaware, Maria Theresa's School of Dance and Tango Parlor, nursing the recently-inflicted bullet wound in my butt, and celebrating the fact that Forrest, a man I once dated (okay, so it was one ill-fated date that ended in the emergency room), had just proposed to my best friend, Leah.

And then Detective Haverton walked in.

For once he wasn't there to question me as a suspect in some untoward event; he was there to deliver that aforementioned pothole.

Okay, okay, so I know that potholes can't actually be delivered like a bouquet of flowers, but this one felt like it was. At least when I fell into this particular pothole, I had company. Accompanying me on the dizzying descent were my father and Fee, not to mention a few of our friends.

Fee. What to say about Fee and her presence in my own personal pothole? I had spent most of my thirty-seven years believing that my mother was dead. However, it turned out that when my father had said “your mother left us,” he didn’t mean it in the dead kind of way. He meant it literally, as in she packed a suitcase and walked out when I was three.

Then, very recently, she walked back in. It turned out she had been living in Europe, travelling and waitressing and otherwise not being a wife or mother. She wasn’t big on sending postcards, either, as in zero. The only one who knew where she was all that time, or even that she was actually alive, was her friend and former French teacher, Ms. LeBon.

To say that I had mixed feelings about the two of them would be accurate only if the mix was heavy on the anger and bitterness and light on the acceptance and forgiveness, like an overly tart vinaigrette. I had recently vowed to let go of at least a part of the negative energy. After all, Fee had found out that a body buried on the property where my father and I lived was actually her long-dead con artist of a father, and she believed that I had gotten shot trying to save her life, which was partly true.

I deserved some smooth sailing, agreed? I was ready to relax for the last few weeks of summer before I returned to my job teaching English at Fool’s Hill High School. I needed to be at full strength before I re-entered the fray that I loved with all of its adolescent joy and angst, and I had decided that meant nothing more stressful than deciding whether to have waffles or a grilled cheese sandwich at the

Stoplight Diner, which my father and I owned along with a group of investors, many of whom were in this very room, come to think of it.

And then Detective Haverton walked in. I had even followed Leah's instructions that I simply had to start calling him Gregory since he had kissed me, but after his little pronouncement, he was right back in Detective Haverton territory with me.

In the process of figuring out the identity of the skeleton buried on the other side of our pond, Detective Haverton had gotten a DNA sample from me. I hadn't thought anything more about it because other means of identification had arisen in the meanwhile, namely dental records and an eyewitness to the burial. It was definitely Fee's father, which made him my grandfather.

Or so I had thought. Now Detective Haverton had thrown that certainty into disarray. He had waltzed in (okay, so he walked rather than waltzed even though he was in a dance studio) and announced that the skeleton and I were definitely not related.

The first eyes I met were my father's. I felt like there should be that dramatic movie music in the background to foretell that something bad was going to happen. Wasn't it enough that I had just met my mother? There was absolutely nothing that I wanted to find out about my father other than what I already knew: he was a good and loving man who had devoted his life to me after his unceremonious abandonment by his wife; he was a beloved head of the Kent County Parks and Recreation until his retirement; he was a straight-shooting, kind man who had friends in every corner of Fool's Hill and beyond. Say the name Ray Callison and

everybody had a story about a kid he'd coached or a favor he'd done or a kindness they'd only realized later was because of him.

I looked at my father with panic in my eyes. "Don't look at me, Rue," he said. "I know nothing about this."

With that, both of us turned to look at Fee. She had told us about how her father's life had been a long series of cons, most of them elaborate schemes where an insurance company would have to pay a large settlement. It seemed that Lewis Flynn, her father, had a deeply held grudge against what he saw as the greedy, money-sucking insurance institutions.

So if Lewis was Fee's father, and Fee was my mother, but I was not related to Lewis, then there was something wrong with this equation. $A + B$ was not equaling C . Even though I was an English major with a strong dislike for math, I could tell that something was not adding up.

I stared at Fee. "If Lewis was your father, then you can't be my mother." I suddenly felt like I was in some nightmare mash-up of a children's book where I was getting ready to look around the room and ask, "Are you my mother? No? Then are you my mother?" over and over again.

"But I am your mother," Fee said. She looked at my father with begging desperation in her eyes and moved to stand next to him.

Wasn't this sweet? There were my supposed parents, standing next to each other like a family Christmas card. All they needed was a puppy.

“I swear I was never with another man,” Fee said frantically. “You have to believe me, Ray. Once I saw you in that booth in the Stoplight Diner, there was never even a thought of anybody else.”

Fee obviously wasn’t thinking clearly. If she had cheated on my father and conceived me with another man, which was such an unbearable thought that I couldn’t even think of it without wanting to projectile vomit, then I would still have been genetically related to the skeleton.

My father clearly had come to the same conclusion. Maybe Fee should have a word with whomever had taught her high school biology. Either she hadn’t gotten the basics right or she had failed the unit on genetics.

“Rue is our daughter,” my father said calmly. How could he be so calm? Didn’t he realize that we had just fallen into a pothole of monumental proportions?

Then I came up with an explanation.

No, I suddenly thought. Just no. Was this going to be one of those “switched at birth” stories that were a staple of soap operas? Did some demented nurse look at a bunch of babies in the hospital nursery on the day I was born and say, “I’m bored. I know, I’ll just switch around these baby bracelets and then sit back and laugh when people come in proclaim that their baby has Aunt Gloria’s dimples or Uncle Pete’s ears?”

“Was I switched at birth?” I blurted out.

Imagine Leah’s surprise when she returned from a romantic engagement dance with Forrest to Joe Cocker’s “You Are So Beautiful” and walked over to give me a closer look at her engagement ring. Instead of waiting to congratulate her, I was

asking if I had been switched at birth. It was probably not what she had expected, although years of friendship with me had taught her to expect the unexpected. She claimed it kept life interesting, but I always marveled that she didn't trade me in for a friend who had fewer misadventures.

"Switched at birth?" Unfortunately, Leah had missed out on the lead-up to this question. "How could you have been switched at birth? You and your father are two peas in a pod."

Somehow her vegetable imagery wasn't reassuring. Two peas in a pod? Of course, Leah taught fourth grade, and her mind was a gentler place than mine was. Where I had crammed my imagination with the murder and deception of Shakespeare, she had filled hers with Dr. Seuss and Mr. Rogers.

"Seriously, Rue," Leah continued. "You and your father have that exact same laugh whenever an Eagles player makes the opposing team look bad. And you have this connection where you know when the other one needs you."

Okay, I couldn't deny the second part. My father had been on an all-day fishing trip with his buddy Harry Collier when I was having the unfortunate experience of getting shot in the butt, and he had felt an inexplicable worry that had made him come home early, just in time to see me rocketed away in an ambulance. The laugh, though? That could be because my father and I had lived together our whole lives and watched a million Phillies and Eagles games together. I had my own wing of the house and he had his, with a shared kitchen, dining room, and living room in the middle. His side had a big garage and mine had a tower, and it sat on twenty acres with a pond. I couldn't imagine living anywhere else.

I could wrap my mind around the thought that I wasn't Fee's daughter since she had spent most of her life gallivanting around, which felt like a road trip from hell to me. Just don't tell me that I am not my father's daughter, though.

Breathe, I told myself. Remember genetics. The fact that I was not related to Fee's father had nothing to do with my own father.

I had completely forgotten about Detective Haverton until he spoke. "Seems like your family might want to have some DNA testing done."

You think? I stared at him in amazement. That's all he had to say after delivering his little tidbit of information?

"I wanted to tell you in person," he said.

Was I supposed to say thank you? I wasn't in a particularly grateful mood at the moment.

"I guess I'd better be going," he said, walking away.

How had that man and I ever kissed?

Chapter Two

I was sitting in a booth in the Stoplight Diner the next morning, eyes bleary after a nearly sleepless night. The few intervals when I drifted off were filled with convoluted dreams where I found out that I had thought that I was a bird but I was actually a squirrel. I fluttered around in a panic until I decided that I could be a flying squirrel. Problem solved until neither the birds nor the squirrels would accept me into their world.

I only wished that reality included flying squirrels instead of unrelated skeletons. Mya Hernandez delivered my order with her omnipresent smile. She put down the Diet Coke, one waffle, and half a grilled cheese sandwich without passing judgment. I simply hadn't been in a decisive mood. I mentally shook myself, not wanting to dump my sour mood on this lovely girl who had been one of my top students last year.

"Are you getting excited to start at the University of Delaware?" I asked her, going for cheerful.

For once, her happy demeanor slipped a bit. "I'm excited, but I'm so worried, Ms. Callison. What if I can't do the work there? What if I disappoint my parents and you and all the people who believe in me?"

“Mya, I’ve sent a lot of students off to college, and you’re in my top one percent when it comes to my confidence that you will succeed.” In fact, the only student I’d ever taught whom I would put higher was Elijah Wu, who had refused to go to college while he searched for the one big idea that would make him rich and famous. At present he was living over the diner and serving as its on-site manager, but I knew that would change one of these days. In the meanwhile, I simply enjoyed being in the company of a genius.

“That’s what scares me,” Mya said. “What if I just fooled everybody into thinking that I’m smart? What if I’m exposed at UD as a big fraud?”

“Mya Hernandez, you stop right there. I will not let you be a victim of imposter syndrome.”

“Imposter syndrome? What’s that?”

“It’s the sense that whatever you achieve is simply blind luck and that you didn’t earn it and you don’t deserve your success. Are you saying that I am not a good enough teacher to know the difference between a truly talented, hard-working, deserving student and one that is just skating by on a run of good fortune?”

Mya Hernandez looked abashed, but there was a hint of a smile at the corners of her mouth. “You, Ms. Callison, are the best teacher in the world. I guess I have to trust you.”

“That is absolutely right, young lady,” I said with laughing fierceness.

“Besides, the only way you could let me down is if you suddenly turned vicious and started hurling scrambled eggs at your customers.”

“I could never do that,” Mya said with a look of absolute horror. “I love working here, and I enjoy my customers. Have I told you how grateful I am that you hired me?”

“Only about a hundred times,” I assured her. I knew that Mya was dedicated to helping out her family, and that although she had an academic scholarship, she planned to commute to Newark for classes three days a week and work here the other days. The customers loved her, and I imagined that she earned better tips than any of the other waitresses.

“Um, Ms. Callison, may I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“It’s about Elijah Wu.”

Really, now. That was interesting. I’d become aware that she knew that Elijah Wu liked his hash browns well done, but was there more going on?

“You could ask me, but since he’s walking up right behind you, why don’t you ask him?” I said with a smile.

Elijah Wu looked like he had just slid out of bed, which was undoubtedly true, but he was still intriguing to look at. His father was a Chinese-American astrophysicist and his mother was a former Brazilian beauty queen; Elijah Wu was the best of both worlds. His brain was off-the-scale quirky, but that was what made him so brilliant. Elijah Wu didn’t just think outside of the box since there was no box in the world that could confine his intelligence.

“Your usual?” Mya asked him with a smile.

“Yes, please,” Elijah Wu answered, with no smile. He had recently turned twenty-one, but he had never learned anything along the way that resembled flirting. Mya looked a bit disappointed as she moved off.

“I’m not related to the skeleton,” I said. “Oh, good morning.”

“That’s interesting,” Elijah Wu said. “Genetically that presents some issues.”

“Doesn’t it, though?” I asked. I pulled out my phone to check the time.

“There’s a medical lab in Dover that opens in about ten minutes. I’m calling to make appointments for Fee and my father and me to get DNA testing done.”

“Your father?” Elijah Wu asked.

“He insisted. He said that he knows how my mind works, and he wants me to have one hundred percent certainty that I am his daughter. He also insists that Fee is my mother. I guess he should know.”

“What about Fee?”

“She insists that she is my mother. Yippee.” I was trying to let go of my anger over her abandonment, but I didn’t always succeed.

“Then either the skeleton isn’t that of her father, or else the man she thought was her father actually isn’t.”

I felt like a slacker. It had taken me a lot of pondering to reach those two possibilities.

“This makes my head hurt,” I said. “Change of topic. How’s the renovation of the second floor going?”

In trade for being an on-site manager and general problem-solver, my father and I had given Elijah Wu the second floor of the diner as his living quarters. He was

thrilled to move out of his parents' basement, and we were reassured to have somebody on the premises. The previous owner, Marcella, had lived over the diner with her parents for a lifetime, and the décor leaned toward paint-by-number artwork, oversized floral sofas, and a master bedroom done totally in pink. Elijah Wu seemed oblivious, but I was convinced that living surrounded by such a clash of colors would lead to some sort of mental disorder for which I did not want to be responsible. It turned out that Forrest, now Leah's fiancé, wanted a space for his financial services office, and in exchange for giving him a part of the second floor, he had to agree to redo Elijah Wu's section as well.

Since Elijah Wu's interests did not include interior design, Leah and I had taken over. Think light gray walls, weathered-looking vinyl plank flooring, and white subway tile in the kitchen and bathroom. With navy blue as an accent color, it would be classic and calm. For reasons I didn't understand, Elijah Wu was insisting on keeping the paint-by-numbers artwork, including a truly frightening rendition of The Last Supper. The person who had painted them had not excelled at fine motor skills, and there were a lot of suspicious-looking blobs.

"The second floor is coming along fine," Elijah Wu said. I would have liked more enthusiasm, but I knew why it was lacking: Elijah Wu mostly lived inside his head. His environment wasn't nearly as important to him as the ideas that bounced around in his mind like crazed billiard balls.

"And Forrest's office?"

"It's good," he said. "Leah has a vision for it."

I was sure she did. Leah had a vision for most things, including my life.

Of course, that was fair enough since I had a vision for her life, too, that including eloping with Forrest so I wouldn't have to wear one of those hideous bridesmaid dresses. I figured that her wedding would be Leah's opportunity to get back at me for anything I'd ever put her through since there was a law or something that said the bridal party had to wear whatever the bride decreed. If Leah wanted to be cruel, my dress would be pink and feature large bows and poofy sleeves.

I'd rather dress up as a flying squirrel.

"Here you go," Mya said, returning with a double order of well-done hash browns with a bottle of ketchup.

"Elijah Wu," I began, "Mya has something she wants to ask you."

Mya blushed a red that would do a vine-ripened Delaware tomato proud. Before she could either speak or flee, a small human hurricane swooped down the center aisle of the diner.

"Elijah Wu," a forceful voice said, "I've been thinking about the pontoons you want to add to your drone to allow for amphibious landings. Obviously they should be retractable to keep the aerodynamic flow, but how do you create a hydraulic system light enough that it doesn't weigh down the drone itself and lessen its speed and travel radius?"

"Good morning, Isabel Louise," I said dryly.

The girl looked at me as if I had suddenly materialized rather than having been sitting across from Elijah Wu the whole time.

"Oh. Hello, Ms. Callison." She looked up at the person she had practically elbowed out of the way. "Mya."

Isabel Louise, to put it mildly, had a history in Fool's Hill. She was the great-great-niece of Ms. LeBon, and her parents, linguistic archeologists who needed to rush to Africa to record a rare dialect before its last speakers died, had dumped their daughter in Fool's Hill for the end of her senior year of high school. Isabel Louise had proceeded to alienate every student at Fool's Hill High School by insisting that she, rather than Mya, deserved to be valedictorian. Mya, gracious heart that she had, had advocated for co-valedictorians.

"Are you ready to start your fall semester at Swarthmore College?" I asked. Actually, I kind of pitied Swarthmore. It had no idea what was looming when Isabel Louise hit their campus. She was, to put it mildly, critical.

Except when it came to Elijah Wu, that is. Even the self-confident Isabel had to admit that she wasn't the smartest person in any room that included Elijah Wu. That seemed to both threaten and intrigue her.

"I need to see your drone first-hand," Isabel Louise demanded, tapping her sneakered foot impatiently.

"I didn't realize you two had been in contact," I said.

"That's a relief," Isabel Louise snapped. "What do you want to do, go through Elijah Wu's phone like some kind of creepy stalker?"

Okay, so I thought that Isabel Louise and I had made some kind of a breakthrough after we had both been victims of a revenge plot gone wrong, but I guessed I had been mistaken.

"I need to get back to work," Mya said softly, walking away.

"Now, Elijah Wu. I need to see your drone now." Isabel Louise demanded.

“Do you need me to do anything for you?” Elijah Wu asked me politely. “By the way, you’re going to have to ask Detective Haverton to provide the DNA information on the skeleton to match with the DNA samples from you and your father and Fee.”

“What am I missing?” Isabel Louise asked.

“Nothing. On to the drone,” I said, watching the two of them head for the stairs that led to the second floor.

I pulled out my phone again. I had appointments to make.

Chapter Three

My father was at the front of the diner greeting patrons as they came in. He was definitely better at the schmoozing part of owning a diner than I was. I excelled at the eating waffles and grilled cheese sandwiches, consuming an unending series of Diet Cokes, and sorting through the drama that occasionally erupted. Most people thought Fool's Hill was a sleepy little town, but that wasn't always the case.

I caught my father's eye, and he strolled back to where I was sitting. The worst of the morning rush was over, and there were a few empty booths so I didn't have to feel guilty about occupying one. I told him that we had appointments at the medical lab in Dover at 10:00 and needed to leave in about an hour. He agreed to call and tell Fee as well as pick her up to drive her there. I quickly made up errands that I needed to run in Dover including something about shopping for rugs the second floor. My father simply gave me a knowing smile and let me get away with it. He knew how uncomfortable Fee made me.

Crap. Now I would actually have to shop for rugs so that I hadn't told my father a lie.

Just as I pulled out my phone to text Leah and apologize for ruining her engagement celebration last night, another person slid into my booth. Why did it suddenly feel like I was having office hours?

I had to ponder for a moment before I addressed the person. "Ike," I said. "Here for breakfast?"

"Actually, I was looking for you." That was odd. First of all, I'd never seen either Ike or Jake without Maria Theresa, and second of all, I'd never seen Ike without Jake. That was why I had to stop to think which one this was.

Ike and Jake had arrived in Fool's Hill in the shadow of Maria Theresa, the new owner of Maria Theresa's School of Dance and Tango Parlor. Her ex-husband (assuming the paperwork had finally gone through) was in prison in New York for tax evasion charges that really meant he was part of the Mafia. Her ex-husband had hired two of his vaguely-related nephews to follow her, in theory to make sure she was safe but in actuality to keep tabs on her. She had come to Fool's Hill in quest of her paramour, Archibald Zooper, and that meant that Ike and Jake had arrived as well. They had quickly decided that it was much smarter to be loyal to the person not in prison, and they were now Maria Theresa's faithful employees.

"How's the dancing going?" I asked Ike. Maria Theresa was insisting that Ike and Jake were going to be instructors at her dance studio despite the fact that they had no dancing or teaching background whatsoever. The last I had heard, they were immersed in watching YouTube and TikTok videos.

"It's hard," Ike sighed. "There are so many steps to remember." Then he smiled. "I'm better at it than Jake."

“Good to know,” I said. I wondered if there were cousin-based words to replace sibling rivalry. “I’m not sure why you were looking for me, though. If you need help with dancing, I am definitely not your person.”

My lack of line dancing skills was legendary, and I had no optimism that any other form of dance would work out better for me.

“No, I need your brain,” Ike said.

I guessed that was better than needing my feet. “What about my brain?”

“I have this idea, but I don’t know if it makes sense, and I wanted your opinion before I ran it by Mary Terry, being as you’re a teacher and all.”

I didn’t know what the “and all” part entailed, but I definitely was a teacher. “Okay,” I said with a bit of hesitation.

“Mary Terry says that we need to diversify,” Ike explained. “She knows that there won’t be enough people who want to learn to do the tango to keep her dance school busy.”

“Good thinking,” I said. I wasn’t sure Fool’s Hill was a tango kind of town, especially considering the booming business at Hoots and Hollers, a dive bar outside of town that featured country music and that accursed line dancing.

“So she wants Jake and I to come up with some other classes that will appeal to different demographics.”

“You’re getting good at this business lingo,” I said.

“Thank you,” he said solemnly. “I might not have a college education but I’m smart that way.”

“The most intelligent person I know doesn’t have a college education, and I know any number of absolute fools who have degrees attached to their names.” As much as I valued education, I wasn’t a snob about it. After all, we didn’t need a world full of English majors. Electricians and plumbers and mechanics were a lot more useful.

“Thank you for saying that, Rue,” Ike said. “That means a lot to me.”

“You’re welcome.” I was a bit confused as to where this conversation was going. “Now what’s the idea you wanted to run by me?”

“At first I thought maybe I could teach a class based on all of those dance crazes that you see on TikTok, but have you seen some of them? I think the police might shut us down. Besides, I don’t think that the young people need a teacher like me. They’re always about ten steps ahead of me.”

“I agree,” I said.

“So then I thought maybe I could teach younger kids,” Ike said. “They wouldn’t know how much I don’t know.” He looked at me and added hastily, “Yet. That I don’t know yet. I’m getting better.”

“I’m sure you are,” I said. I could only imagine how stressful it must be to try to imitate dance videos all day. I’d rather be a professional cat litter scooper.

“So here’s what I thought,” Ike said. “Tell me if you think it’s stupid.”

“Oh, I will.” I had a reputation for not always finding the boundary between honesty and rudeness.

“So I was thinking back to when I was in middle school,” Ike said, “especially the early part of it. The school would have these dances, and my mother always made me go. Do schools still have those dances?”

Other than one father-daughter dance and my senior prom, I’d avoided those. I think my father was relieved not to have to take me shopping for frilly dresses.

“Unfortunately, the answer is yes. Usually the PTA sponsors them, either as a supposed reward or as a fundraiser. They have names like Holiday Dazzle or Spring Fling.”

“Great,” Ike said. “Do they start young?”

“I know Leah always chaperones a dinner dance where they celebrate the kids leaving elementary school for middle school. Why?”

“Okay, so I was thinking back to all those dances my mother made me go to. Some were held by my school and some by the church, but there I was at every one of them, wearing some suit that my mother picked out for me and a tie that I had to leave looped over my doorknob because I could never remember how to tie it.”

I suddenly was imagining a young Ike, hair slicked back and looking like he was being led to slaughter by his tie. “I bet you were cute,” I said with a laugh.

“I was,” he said. “Wait, I don’t mean to sound conceited, but I was a cute kid. All my aunts pinched my cheeks every time they saw me and told me that I was so cute they wanted to gobble me right up.”

That precipitated bad images of Hansel and Gretel in my mind, but I didn’t share my mental picture. “So you hated the dances?” I asked.

“The first one, I did. I just stood around with the rest of the guys, leaning against the folded-up bleachers in the gym.”

I had to smile. I’d chaperoned high school dances where the same thing still happened.

“But then I had an epiphany. Like that word, huh?”

“It’s one of my favorite words,” I said. “What was your epiphany?”

“I realized that even dorky guys not nearly as cute as me were popular with the girls if they were willing to dance.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes,” Ike said with a note of glee in his voice. “It didn’t even matter if they were good dancers. It dawned on me that the guys that were out there dancing with all the girls were having much more fun than the guys leaning against the bleachers pretending they were too cool for school.”

“So you danced?” I asked.

“Oh, I danced,” Ike said. “I’m not saying I was good, but I was enthusiastic. Before I knew it, girls were asking me if I was going to the next dance and if I would dance with them. These were girls that used to ignore me like I was a ghost or something.”

“And you are telling me this because?”

“Oh, sorry, Rue. I’m telling you this because what if I taught a class just for young boys and taught them enough simple steps that they could impress the girls and gain some, let’s call it social confidence.”

“I think that’s a brilliant idea,” I said. “I bet parents would love the idea, even if they had to drag their kids in kicking and screaming.”

“You really think they’d kick and scream?” Ike asked, his face falling.

“I don’t know many young boys who would willingly go to a dance class,” I said. “You’d need a good name for it.”

“You’re right,” he said. “How about ‘Impress the Girls?’”

“Then you’ll scare the mothers,” I said. “Keep thinking. You need something catchy.”

“Don’t Dance Like a Dork?” he suggested.

I shook my head.

“Trust Me and Tango?”

I laughed out loud. “I don’t think you want them to learn the tango quite yet. They need to work up to that.”

“You’ll Thank Me Later?”

“Kids aren’t much for thinking long-term,” I said. “That sound more like what their mothers say when they’re taking them to the dentist.”

“Steps for Success?” Ike suggested.

“Yes!” I said. “Think about it. You could add in how to greet an adult appropriately, how to shake hands firmly, how to ask a girl to dance, how to tie a tie.”

“I still don’t know how to tie a tie,” Ike admitted.

“YouTube videos,” I said. “It could basically be a dance and etiquette class as long as you don’t mention the words. And at the end, maybe Maria Theresa could

host a dance for the young'uns." I was actually getting excited about the idea. It would civilize some of the boys before I got them in high school.

"And Mary Terry could make Jake teach a class for the girls," Ike crowed.

"This is the best idea ever. I can't wait to tell her."

He leaped out of the booth and came over to my side. He reached in and gave me an enthusiastic hug. "You're the best, Rue. I owe you big time. I'll think of how to pay you back for this."

"No need," I said with a smile.

"Oh, yes," he said. Then he straightened and assumed a formal tone. "If I am going to teach boys how to be polite and respectful to girls, then I need to practice the same thing myself." Then he looked apprehensive. "Not that I'm calling you a girl. I know you're a woman. No disrespect."

"None taken," I assured him.

"Good," he said with a grin. "I'll get your number from Mary Terry and text you when I think of an appropriate thank you."

He bounded out of the diner, holding the door open as Leah came in. "Your friend is brilliant," he shouted to her in passing.

"What was that all about?" Leah asked as she filled the recently vacated seat in my booth.

"I'm not exactly sure," I said.

"He's kind of cute," Leah said, looking at me appraisingly.

Chapter Four

“What do you mean, Ike’s kind of cute?” I asked Leah. “You’ve been engaged less than twenty-four hours, and you’re already checking out other men?”

Leah laughed as she slid into the booth opposite me. “Silly goose. I meant for you, not for me.”

Only a fourth grade teacher and my best friend could get away with calling me a silly goose without getting called something unrepeatable in response.

“Ike? Me? You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Why?” Leah asked. “He really is kind of cute, and he thinks you’re brilliant.”

“Let’s see,” I said, holding up one finger. At least it was an appropriate one.

“First of all, he’s too young.”

“I bet he’s older than you think. He has one of those baby faces. Besides, isn’t that being ageist? You’re discriminating against him based on his age?”

“Second of all, his job description is basically being Maria Theresa’s minion. I’m not sure I can respect that.”

“You need to be more open-minded. Maria Theresa saw great potential in him and now is making him an integral part of her new business. He’s getting in on the ground floor of what could be a very successful franchise.”

“Franchise?” I snorted. “It will be a miracle if this one location survives more than a few months. Besides, he’s learning how to be a dance teacher by watching YouTube videos.”

“Just like you did when you needed to set up your phone and I did when I needed inspiration for new bulletin boards.”

I swear elementary school teachers have an unhealthy and unnatural obsession with bulletin boards. There simply is no equivalent for high school teachers. Wait. Maybe the SAT and AP Exam scores of our students should count. I can assure you, however, that little construction paper buses with the name of each student has never and will never grace the walls of my high school English classroom.

“Okay, so YouTube is helpful. Still, even if Ike learns the steps, that doesn’t mean he knows how to be a teacher.”

One of the things I’ve learned the hard way is that because everybody has had teachers, they somehow think they could be one. Much of the general public has no appreciation for how hard it is to be an effective teacher. It frustrates me sometimes. Just because everybody goes to a doctor doesn’t mean they think they’re qualified to be one. Why should it be any different with teachers? Okay, I admit that doctors go to school for a lot longer and get paid much more, but the basic point still holds.

I yanked my brain back on topic and told Leah about the idea for Steps for Success. "Ike's right – that is brilliant." Leah was nearly matching Ike's enthusiasm. Maybe she needed to break up with Forrest and take up with the budding dance instructor. Then I saw how she kept looking at the diamond ring that now graced her left hand and reconsidered mentioning that little possibility.

"I think he'll need to practice," I said. "I'd hate to see him get decimated the first time he faces actual kids."

"Oh, Rue, I've got the absolute perfect idea," Leah said. "He needs to practice on Ricky."

I burst out laughing. Forget me – Leah was the brilliant one. Ricky had been both the bane of Leah's existence and her greatest success story last school year. As a fourth grader, he had been deemed incorrigible by everybody but Leah. He cursed at teachers, threw books out of windows, refused to read, and otherwise terrorized the elementary school. Pleasant Hills Elementary School had never expelled a student in its history, but Ricky was well on his way to being the first. Leah, however, had taken him on as her project. She kept telling him that he was smart and that she would never stop believing in him. He did everything in his power to dissuade her. Then, the grandmother with whom Ricky lived had a heart attack, and while she was recovering, Leah convinced my father to let Ricky stay with him. The change in the boy was remarkable. My father taught Ricky to play baseball, and the exercise, fresh air, and attention tamed at least a few of Ricky's demons. This summer Leah and my father had seen to it that Ricky was attending a summer camp that combined academics with athletics, and Ricky was having a great time. His

grandmother was thrilled that he came home so exhausted every day that all she had to do was feed him dinner and make him take a bath.

Despite the improvement, though, there was an energy and a smart mouth and a resistance to risking failure that would make Ricky the ultimate challenge in a dance and etiquette class. I only knew one thing: I'd pay the price of admission to watch Ike take on Ricky.

If I were a betting woman, my money would be on Ricky, all ten years of him.

"Perfect," I told Leah. "If Ike can teach Ricky, then bring on the rest of the little demons."

"Young children are not demons," Leah said, just as I knew she would. "They simply have a lot of energy and tend to say what they think. You should appreciate that about them."

Wait. Had Leah just implied that I was like a child in my tendency to say what I thought without always managing to apply the filters that most adults used?

I tried to be offended but gave it up. She had too many examples to use against me.

"So you tell Ike that we can provide him with the perfect student on whom to practice," Leah said. "The next time you talk to him, that is. Which probably will be soon, given how enthusiastic he was about you when he rushed out of the diner."

"Will you stop?" I said, refusing to give her the satisfaction of laughing. "I brainstormed with the man. That's all."

"Brainstorming might be the new first base," Leah said.

“Stop. He said that he was grateful for my help and that he would pay me back. That’s it.”

“Pay you back? What does he mean by that?”

“Trust me, I said it wasn’t necessary. My greatest fear is that he’s thinking in terms of free dance lessons.”

“Or private ones,” Leah said.

“If you keep on like this, I’m going to fling up my hands in horror and run away every time I see him. Besides,” I said, needing to change her focus, “I thought you wanted me to go out with Detective Haverton.”

“I did,” Leah said. “I do,” she corrected herself. “It’s just that it seems to be taking forever for that relationship to progress.”

“Do not use the ‘r’ word,” I snapped. “I am not in a relationship with him.”

“He kissed you.”

“Once.”

“You said it was a great kiss.”

“It was,” I admitted, “but it was one kiss. It could have just been a mistake.”

“But then he texted you to go out to dinner.”

“Right, but I was otherwise occupied with getting shot in the butt at the time,”

I replied.

“Has he asked you again?”

“No. He walked into the dance studio to tell me that my supposed grandfather wasn’t related to me and then walked out again.”

Leah paused. "I guess I see his dilemma. It wouldn't quite work to say, 'That skeleton that was dug up on your property doesn't share any DNA with you, and would you like to go out to dinner this weekend?' The two don't fit together very smoothly."

With that, my phone whooshed at me. I looked at the text. It was from Detective Haverton. "Do you have a lab test scheduled? Where? When?"

I held my phone out to Leah. "Isn't that romantic?" I said, sarcasm on full display. I texted back the location and time, my message just as terse as his.

"I'll try to expedite," was his response.

"At least he's thinking about you. I bet he's sorry he just dropped that bombshell on you and left. There were a lot of people around, Rue. I'm sure he felt uncomfortable."

"I'm sure he did," I admitted. I glanced at my phone again. "I need to leave in fifteen minutes, and the only thing I want to talk about is you and your engagement. Let me see that ring again."

Leah held out her hand, and I studied the ring carefully. It had a modest-sized diamond set in yellow gold, the stone round and classic, the band simple.

"Forrest did a good job," I admitted. "You wouldn't want anything gaudy or fancy."

"I love it," Leah said.

"Great. Now let's get to the rest of it. Am I going to be your maid of honor?"

"Of course you are," Leah said without hesitation. "If you'll agree to do it, that is."

“Will I have to wear a pink dress with big bows and poofy sleeves?” I asked.

Confusion wrinkled Leah’s brow. “Why would I do that to you? You would hate it.”

“That’s exactly why you would make me wear something like that – payback for all the times I’ve mocked your holiday sweaters.” And threatened to burn them.

“And my bulletin boards,” Leah added.

Little did she know how much I mentally mocked those bulletin boards. “And your ability to wear white and pastel colors and stay clean,”

“Now that I think about it, I’m envisioning you in a floor-length bright pink princess dress with a big skirt, a sweetheart neckline, and huge puffy sleeves trimmed in lace,” Leah said, looking up and squinting her eyes as she created a vision for herself. “It definitely requires pearls, high heels with pointed toes, an elaborate hairdo, and a lot of makeup.”

“You wouldn’t do that,” I said, trying to keep the fear out of my voice.

“Don’t dare me,” she said with a smile that, if it hadn’t been Leah, I would have sworn was diabolical.

“I know you won’t do it for one simple reason,” I said, regaining my confidence.

“Because I’m a nice person?” Leah asked.

“Because every single person in attendance would be staring at me, wondering why you had decided on a circus theme for your wedding, and nobody would even notice you walking down the aisle.”

Leah burst out laughing. “It might be worth it.”

“Have you and Forrest considered eloping?” I asked, more serious than she might have realized.

“Rue, we’ve only been engaged for a few hours. We haven’t gotten to wedding planning quite yet.”

“Well, now that’s I’m officially your maid of honor, you can just leave all of that to me.”

Leah recoiled in horror that was part mock and part genuine. “Rue, I love you, but you can’t plan a birthday party without ending up with a dead body.”

“That was not my fault,” I protested.

“Still, I’m not taking any chances. Don’t worry, you’ll have plenty of responsibilities, but there are certain things that I’ll need to take care of myself.”

“What, like the invitations, the decorations, the music, the clothes, the vows, the music, the food, things like that?”

“Exactly,” Leah agreed.

“So what does that leave for me?” I asked.

“You, my friend, will be in charge of guest wrangling.”

“Guest wrangling?” I asked. I’d never heard of that being a role at somebody’s wedding.

“Exactly. If people don’t like each other, you’ll be in charge of keeping them separated from each other. And if any problems arise, you’ll have to solve them. I’ll be otherwise occupied with being beautiful and serene.”

I knew Leah was saying that jokingly, but that is exactly what she would be. I could already imagine it.

“Are you going to have Ricky as your ring bearer?” I asked.

Leah looked appalled. “Oh my gosh. You just got a new job. You’ll have to be the Ricky wrangler.”

I pulled out my phone. “Let’s look for the top places for elopements.”

Chapter Five

Once my father, Fee, and I gave our names at the medical lab in Dover, an important-looking woman in a lab coat quickly came out to talk to us. “Detective Haverton was emphatic that your test results be expedited and matched with the DNA profile he transmitted to us from the body of the deceased.” She looked from one of us to the others. “My condolences.”

“Thank you,” I said gravely. I didn’t feel the need to explain that the death had occurred over thirty years ago and that even if it was my grandfather, I had absolutely no memories of him. Besides, his last scam was a plan to have me flung out of the Mad Tea Cups ride at Disney World in order to get a big insurance settlement, which did not make me feel particularly connected to my supposed grandfather.

We gave a technician the requested samples, and the lab coat woman returned to assure us that she would call with results within twenty-four hours.

“Your Detective Haverton is very efficient,” Fee said as she and my father walked to Betty Ford, his trusty old truck.

“He’s not mine,” I retorted before I stopped to think that she probably intended no offense. “Sorry. The whole thing is weird.”

“Yes, it is,” Fee said somberly.

“We’ll figure out this family tree,” my father said, opening the truck’s door for Fee.

“We might need to lop off a few of the branches.” It wasn’t until the words were echoing in the air that I realized how snarky they sounded. My father simply shook his head and left. It wasn’t like he was surprised; he’d been living with my mouth since I’d learned to talk, which I’m sure was ahead of schedule. I couldn’t imagine an existence without words.

I don’t like to go shopping, but I did. I wasn’t going to be an even worse daughter by lying to my father, so I actually bought an area rug for Elijah Wu’s living quarters. It was gray and white with a geometric pattern, and it was on sale. With much folding flat of seats, I managed to shove it into the Prius, where it extended from windshield to hatchback. I drove back to Fool’s Hill trying not to make any sharp left turns that would cause the tightly rolled rug to wallop me.

I parked in the back lot and went inside to find Elijah Wu to get him to help carry the rug upstairs. “So,” I asked as we struggled up the stairs, “how was Isabel Louise?”

Elijah Wu seemed to consider his words carefully. “She’s intense.”

“Good word choice.” We propped up the rug in a corner to keep it safe while the renovations were in progress. “Do you think she’ll enjoy college?”

That brought a soft laugh from Elijah Wu. “I don’t think ‘enjoy’ is in Isabel Louise’s personality. She battles life. She’s pretty much on the attack all the time.”

“Even with you? She respects you.”

“Especially with me,” Elijah Wu said. “She’s also the most competitive person I’ve ever met. Everything is a contest for her.”

“Well, if she wants to out-think you, she’s going to lose.” Just as I would bet on Ricky over Ike, I would bet on Elijah Wu over anybody, including Isabel Louise.

“So she’s going to fight Swarthmore College?” I asked, thinking of the prestigious school with an impeccable reputation for academic excellence.

“Absolutely,” Elijah Wu said. “She’s already complaining because they won’t let her take ten classes during her first semester.”

“But the normal college load is four to six,” I protested.

“Normal does not apply to Isabel Louise,” Elijah Wu said. “You know how most students are lucky to graduate from college in four years? She has a two year plan.”

“What’s her rush?” I asked. “She has the rest of her life to be an adult.”

“She just wants to win,” Elijah Wu said. “She pushes until somebody says she can’t do something, and then she does it.”

“It must be exhausting to be her,” I said with a smile.

“It’s kind of exhausting to be around her, but it’s interesting. Keeps me on my toes.”

That was saying a lot.

“She’s coming back again soon. She swears she has a design for a hydraulic system for my drone that’s better than mine.”

“Is she right?”

“I doubt it, but I’m keeping an open mind.”

Suddenly there was a scream from downstairs, and Elijah Wu and I looked at each other and dashed for the stairs.

It was easy to identify the source of the scream since every customer's head was swiveled to look at the same booth. There, in the aisle, was Maria Theresa. What was she doing screaming in the Stoplight Diner? Didn't she have enough to occupy her with her school of dance and tango parlor?

"What are you doing here?" she yelled in a voice so theatrical that I would have laughed if I weren't afraid she was going to scare away the paying customers. "What are you doing here with that predator?"

Crap. He was so short that I couldn't see him over the back of the booth, but the target for her wrath had to be Archibald Zooper. I had become surprisingly fond of the Danny DeVito look-alike, at least until he had confessed to me that he had a giant crush on Fee. I liked him, but the thought of having Archibald Zooper as my stepfather was a stretch too far for me.

As Elijah Wu and I race-walked down the center aisle of the diner, I could see who was sharing the booth with Archibald Zooper. There, in her brilliantly-colored caftan-ish outfit, was Ms. LeBon.

Darn. I had thought that Maria Theresa and Ms. LeBon had reached a *détente*. After a tense start when both were part of a weird love triangle with Archibald Zooper, the women had seemed to almost become friendly. Ms. LeBon had set her sights on the recently widowed Uncle Goose, which was doomed to failure since my uncle had no interest in her or any of the other vultures who were circling around him. He had been a one-woman man his whole life, and with Aunt Deary's

recent death, he had no interest in moving on. Then the arrival of Fee had so occupied Ms. LeBon's time and energy that she had accepted Maria Theresa as Archibald Zooper's choice.

Neither of the women, I presumed, knew about the man's crush. Of course, Archibald was proving himself to be a bit fickle. Maybe he had already moved on from Fee.

"We needed to rehearse our showcase tango," Maria Theresa yelled, her face as bright as her scarlet ruffled blouse. "'Where is he?' I wondered. 'Perhaps he dashed down to the diner to bring me back a treat to keep my strength up.' So I came here to tell you what a wonderful, thoughtful man you are, especially if you had ordered me a root beer float, and what do I find? You are sitting here communing with that predator." At the word "predator" she leaned down and spat the word at Ms. LeBon.

Ms. LeBon could have ended this scene right then. All she needed to do was tell Maria Theresa that she and Archibald were merely having a casual conversation about the weather or whatever. Instead, she proceeded to do what she had to know would push Maria Theresa's last button. She put her hand on Archibald's hand and smiled smugly. "Whenever I want him," she purred, "he's mine."

What on earth was wrong with her? Why was she doing that? Did she actually believe it? Did she even want Archibald?

Just as I was trying to figure out how to defuse the situation, the diner door opened and in came Ike and Jake. It was obvious that they had been sprinting down

the street but then were trying to slow down and stroll once they had an audience. It wasn't working very well since they were panting.

They did a nervous saunter down the aisle until they were on either side of Maria Theresa, each one taking an elbow. "We need you back at the studio," Jake said.

"I'm busy here," Maria Theresa snapped.

"There's a gas leak and the whole place might explode unless you deal with it." Ike's words came spewing out in a rush.

Wow. Not bad for an on-the-spot lie.

At least I hoped it was a lie.

"Fine," Maria Theresa huffed, whirling on her heel. Then she spun back. Her tango moves were coming in useful. She picked up Ms. LeBon's hand and removed it from Archibald's. "If the studio is still standing in thirty seconds, you need to be there," she said to Archibald. "I'd recommend you don't let me down."

Elijah Wu and I stared at each other. A buzz filled the diner as customers began to talk about what they had just witnessed. Maybe we should rebrand the place as a dinner theatre.

Or maybe a lunch theatre. We could hire out-of-work actors to stage scenes; that would give our customers something to discuss other than Fool's Hill gossip.

Archibald Zooper scooted out of the booth and took my arm. "May we talk, Rue?" he asked.

“I think we’d better,” I said firmly, leading him to the back door. “Archibald, you own a share of this diner, and right now you’re not good for business. What was all that drama?”

“I apologize, Rue. I’m afraid you’re not going to like my explanation.”

“Great,” I said. “Way to lower my expectations.”

“I was hoping Fee would be here. I thought she might be jealous if she saw me paying attention to Cecille, so I invited her to sit with me.”

I did not want to tell Archibald that Fee was with my father. Come to think of it, they should be back from Dover by now.

I hate it when I have all kinds of things that I don’t want to think about, which guarantees that I will think about them. Archibald and Maria Theresa and Ms. LeBon. My father and Fee. Detective Haverton and I.

I needed a distraction. “Do you think there really is a gas leak?” I asked him.

“I certainly hope not.”

With that we both jumped at the sound of a loud boom.

Chapter Six

The boom made both Archibald Zooper and me jump. Maria Theresa's dance studio was only two doors down from the diner, and that was too close for comfort. Did I need to evacuate the diner in case there were more explosions? Why were the customers continuing to eat as if nothing of great significance was going on?

I grabbed Archibald Zooper's arm. "We have to go see if Maria Theresa and Ike and Jake are okay," I said, feeling frantic. "We have to see if the building is still standing.

We left out the back door, raced around to Main Street, and headed down the block. There was another loud boom. As Archibald and I skidded to a stop, the sky opened as if it were one of those dousing showers that kids love to pull in science labs.

There was yet another boom, which I now identified as thunder.

Now I understood why the customers had remained so calm. It wasn't like late summer thunderstorms were unusual in Delaware.

Since we were already almost there, we dashed to the dance studio, dripping wet but relieved to see the building standing. The relief didn't last long.

"You," Maria Theresa said, pointing a long red fingernail at Archibald Zooper. "I am a passionate woman, and when I give my heart to a man, I give it fully."

I wanted to laugh at her overblown drama, but I thought better of it and coughed to stifle my chuckle.

Maria Theresa closed in on Archibald and tapped him on the chest. "And exclusively," she said.

Okay, so how ironic was it that she was talking about exclusivity when she had still been married to her Mafioso husband when she took up with Archibald? Again, I coughed to keep that question silently rhetorical.

Maria Theresa wheeled around in a circle, flinging her arms outward. "If you insist on consorting with that slutty Cecille, then this town isn't big enough for both of us. Three of us. All of us."

I was fixating on the word "slutty." Wasn't Ms. LeBon a bit old to be considered slutty, or was that ageist? Perhaps someone decades into her AARP membership could still earn slut status.

Archibald Zooper finally found his voice. "Consorting? I was sitting in a public place having a simple conversation. That certainly does not qualify as consorting. She was telling me about her friend, Fee."

"Why?" Maria Theresa hissed. "Why did she want you know about her friend?"

“I think she was just making polite conversation with someone she happened to bump into,” Archibald Zooper said. “I have polite conversations with any number of people.” He pointed at me. “Like Rue.”

Oh no. Don’t drag me into this.

“If I have to worry every minute that Cecille LeBon can reclaim you with a come hither look, then I swear, do you hear me, I swear, Archibald Zooper, that I will break my lease, close this place down, and leave.”

“No,” I could hear Ike and Jake moan in unison. I imagined that they could see their zillions of hours of watching dance videos going down the drain.

Maria Theresa wheeled on them. “Don’t think I won’t.”

Ike and Jake looked pleadingly at Archibald Zooper.

“Maria Theresa,” he began, “you are underestimating me if you think that Cecille, lovely as she might be, can make me turn away from you. I believe that the connection we have when we dance the tango is magical. I want to preserve that, to see what follows.”

I checked out Maria Theresa, and I could see her anger ebbing. It was the sincerity of Archibald’s delivery, the eye contact, the slight hint of a smile. He was good.

“But,” he continued, and I could see Ike and Jake tense up, “you simply may not treat me as your property. I must be free to talk to whomever I desire, to be trusted. If you cannot offer me the dignity of that, then I have grave concerns about our future.”

I had grave concerns because Archibald had told me that he had a crush on Fee, but I certainly was not going to bring that up.

“You’re saying you’re a man, a very attractive man to whom women naturally gravitate,” Maria Theresa purred.

“I am a man,” Archibald Zooper said, puffing out his pudgy chest.

“A man who will not be bossed around by the likes of me,” Maria Theresa said in a more normal voice.

“Exactly,” Archibald Zooper said, “no more than I would order you around. I can only imagine how many men will come to your dance classes and be seduced by your beauty and talent, and I have to trust that I am up to that competition.”

Oh, Archibald, you were doing really well, but that’s too much.

Except Archibald Zooper was reading his one-woman audience better than I was. She gazed at the little man and then strode dramatically over to the shelf where the sound system resided. Soon the pulsing beat of tango music filled the air.

“We must dance,” Maria Theresa proclaimed to Archibald Zooper. They clasped their hands together and began.

After a few measures, I understood why the tango had once been featured in the brothels of Argentina and why churches had banned it as immoral. This dance definitely didn’t need an audience.

I beat a hasty retreat out the door, followed by Ike and Jake.

“That was close,” Jake said.

“Sorry, Rue, for the disturbance in your diner,” Ike said. “We usually keep a better eye on Mary Terry than that, but she got away from us.”

I looked at Ike and Jake with renewed respect. Keeping the volatile Maria Theresa from behaving in a way that could get her thrown in jail must be harder than I had envisioned.

“I hear that you helped Ike here come up with the idea for a dance and etiquette class for young men,” Jake said, falling into step beside me.

“I helped him brainstorm, but the idea was his,” I said cautiously.

“And so now I’m expected to teach a class to girls?” he asked.

“Maybe,” I said, hedging my bets. “How do you feel about that?”

“Scared,” he admitted, which made me laugh. Jake was a big man with a shiny bald head, and it was hard to imagine him being intimidated by a gaggle of elementary or middle school girls.

Then I thought about some of the girls I taught and how they were only a few years removed from the ranks of the girls who might take the classes. “That’s very wise of you,” I told Jake. “They can be a handful.”

“So I would have to be mean to them?” Jake asked.

“Mean? You can’t be mean. It’s not like school, which they have to attend. This would be a choice. If they leave the first class and tell their parents that you’re mean to them and they don’t want to go back, your teaching career is over.”

“So how do I do it?” Jake asked.

“You make them get a little bit of a crush on you while being absolutely appropriate with them. If you are creepy with them or say anything even close to inappropriate to them, I’ll run you out of town myself.”

“Is this supposed to make me feel better?” Jake whined.

“No,” I answered firmly. “It’s supposed to make you respect how hard it is to be a teacher.”

“Oh, right. You’re one, aren’t you?”

“I certainly am,” I said, keeping my face stern.

I looked from Jake to Ike and back again. “I have an offer for the two of you that you really should not refuse.”

I could see them both stifle smiles. So much for trying to sound tough. “I have a trial student for each of you. Leah and I will watch you try to teach your student, and we’ll critique you.”

“You’re going to grade us?” Ike yelped.

“Absolutely,” I said. “And just for your information, I’m notorious for being a hard grader.” I didn’t put forward any claims about Leah, who would find a way to make even her criticism sound nice.

“Your student is named Ricky,” I said to Ike. “He’s going into fifth grade.”

Ike nodded. “Okay. One kid. I can handle that.”

Clearly Ike had never met Ricky.

I turned to Jake. “Your student is a bit older than your target audience, but she will give you plenty of honest feedback.”

“Okay,” Jake said. “What’s her name?”

“Isabel Louise,” I said.

“No problem,” Jake said. “One girl. Isabel. Make her like me. I can do this.” I didn’t know if he was trying to convince me or himself.

Clearly he had never met Isabel Louise.

This was going to be fun.

I was going to have to talk to Maria Theresa and make sure she didn't close down her studio because right now, I needed the entertainment.

But how on earth was I going to convince Isabel Louise to go to a dance class? I could bribe Ricky with chocolate marshmallow ice cream, but what would work with Isabel Louise?

There was only one answer.

Maybe that new area rug was a down payment on what I would owe Elijah Wu.

Chapter Seven

Even my father was nervous the next day. We weren't sure which of us the doctor from the lab would contact, so we both were pacing around, cell phones in hand. I figured there was a two in three chance that she would call one of us rather than Fee, and I wanted to hear the news directly from the professional.

Not that I didn't trust Fee to tell us the truth.

Actually, I didn't trust Fee to tell us the truth. After all, she'd been raised by a pair of con artists.

I could hear Leah in my head telling me to be nice.

I told my mental Leah to shut up.

Finally my father and I decided that we might as well go to the diner. We sat down in an empty booth and were startled to see Fee there, bustling around waiting on customers.

"One of your waitresses called me. It seems her son was acting out so badly at day care that they made her pick him up, and she asked if I would finish her shift,"

Fee said as she whizzed by, leaving a cup of coffee for my father and a Diet Coke for me.

“Thanks,” my father called to her departing back.

I had to admit that Fee was an outstanding waitress. She seemed to have telepathy, knowing what customers wanted before they even knew it themselves.

“Rue,” my father began, “you know that these lab results don’t really matter. They have nothing to do with who you are.”

“They kind of do,” I replied. “I mean, it tells us whether or not I lived most of my life with my grandfather buried on the other side of the pond.”

“But if he was or if he wasn’t, you’re still the Rue you’ve always been,” my father said.

With that his phone rang. He listened for a moment and then said, “Could you wait just a moment, please?” He waved to Fee, signaling her to join us and holding up his phone as an explanation. She slid into the booth beside him after having a quick word with another of the waitresses. “The lab?” she asked.

My father nodded. He spoke into his phone. “I’m with Rue and Fee, and if my daughter knows how to do it, we’ll put you on speaker.”

He handed me the phone, and I activated the speaker function and put the phone in the center of the table. “The results are definitive,” the doctor said, “with 99.6 percent certainty.”

That averaged up to a hundred percent even in my grading system.

“Raymond Callison is the father of Ruelle Callison,” the doctor continued, and my father gave me a smile and a thumbs up, which made me smile in response.

“Told you,” he whispered to me. “Can’t get rid of me that easily.”

As if I would ever want to.

“Fiona Callison is the mother of Ruelle Callison,” the doctor continued.

Fee didn’t look at me but rather smiled warmly at my father. “Told you,” she whispered, using his words.

“The DNA sample provided to us by Detective Haverton,” the doctor continued, “has no relationship to Raymond Callison, Fiona Callison, or Ruelle Callison.”

Fee looked stunned. After all, she had been told by the person who buried him that the man was Lewis Flynn, whom Fee had always thought was her father.

“I will send you the written reports,” the doctor said. We all said our thanks, and I grabbed the phone and silenced it.

“When you think back, can you remember anything that might have been a hint that there was more to the story of your parentage than you knew?” I asked, trying to word my question a bit diplomatically.

Fee took a moment to ponder before she spoke. “I’ll have to give it more thought, but nothing is coming to mind. There was a lot of drama in my family, a lot of moving around and changing identities, but I don’t remember anything that made me suspicious about my parents being my parents.”

“There are a bunch of possibilities,” I said, my mind racing. “Maybe he really believed he was your father, but your mother cheated on him and conceived you with another man.”

“I don’t think so,” Fee said. “My mother didn’t seem like that kind of person. She was always subservient to my father, going along with whatever he wanted. I can’t see her having the nerve to cheat on him.”

“What do you know about your mother?” I asked. “Once you walked away, did you ever have any contact with her?”

Fee looked down, her voice soft. “No. I needed distance from everything when I left, and that definitely included my parents. Then, after I’d been gone for a while, it didn’t feel right to try to contact them, just like I was ashamed to come back to you.”

There was that pesky thirty-four year absence that I was having such a hard time forgiving.

“Have you tried to contact her since you’ve been back?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t even know where to start,” she said.

“Now that you know that your father wasn’t your father, don’t you want to know if your mother was your mother?” I asked.

“I don’t know what I want,” she said, her eyes filling with tears.

“Think about it, though,” I insisted. “Her husband was killed thirty-four years ago. He came to see you and never returned. What do you think she would have done?”

“I have no idea,” Fee said. “I can’t imagine her without my father.”

“Maybe they stole you,” I said, that random idea popping into my mind and out of my mouth. “Maybe you were part of one of Lewis’ schemes.”

I was glad that I hadn’t invested much emotional energy in thinking of Lewis Flynn as my grandfather.

“Rue,” my father said in that warning tone that meant I had gone too far.

“Or maybe you were adopted,” I said in a more reasonable tone.

“I need to get back to my job,” Fee said, wiping her eyes. She slid out of the booth.

“Fee,” I said, before she could escape, “what name was your mother using when you left?”

“I think she was still using Ruth Flynn,” Fee said, “although I can’t be sure of that. I know she had other identities available to her.”

Right. Lewis Flynn’s best friend had been a skilled document forger.

“Sorry,” I said to my father after Fee left. “I guess I got carried away.”

“Telling her that her parents could have stolen her as part of a scam was a bit rough.”

“Right,” I said, but I was still intrigued with that possibility. Maybe I should look through those pictures of kidnapped children where they do age progression to show what the person would look like years later. “But Dad, don’t I have the right to know about my genetics? I might have grandparents out there.”

“I suppose you might,” my father said, and I saw a shadow of sorrow pass over him. His parents had been killed in a car accident before I was born, and he’d often told me that he wished they could have met me.

I needed to talk to the Brain Trust, a group of three retired Fool's Hill High School teachers who were always a fount of information. Mr. Barnes, the bow-tie-wearing former history teacher, viewed research as an archeological dig and was skilled at finding a thread of information and following it. Miss Henflinger, the cardigan-wearing former math teacher, was a holy terror who kept everybody in town in line, including me, although she had a soft spot for my cat. Ms. LeBon, however, was a different story since she had been the only one that Fee had stayed in touch with throughout her extended absence.

Crap. What if Ms. LeBon knew more about my parentage than I did? She was an annoying woman, and I was certain that she didn't like me. I had never known what Archibald Zooper had seen in her before he chose Maria Theresa instead. I didn't like the possibility that she had insider information.

Elijah Wu. Maybe I should talk to him instead. Unlike Mr. Barnes, Elijah Wu was not bound by the limits of legality. He seemed to be capable of hacking into databases that a normal citizen should not be able to access, and I had recently learned about the existence of the dark web through him. I didn't want to know about all of Elijah Wu's sources; I merely trusted that he used his skills for good rather than evil.

Just as I was ready to go upstairs to look for Elijah Wu, I heard a voice.

"May I join you?"

I looked up, jolted out of my thoughts. "Detective Haverton," I said.

I guess he took that as a yes because he slid in opposite me.

“Thank you for expediting the lab results and providing the DNA from the skeleton,” I said. “My father is my father and my mother is my mother but the skeleton isn’t my grandfather.”

“Interesting,” Detective Haverton said.

Maybe I wouldn’t have to ask Elijah Wu for help. “Is there any way you can figure out who Fee’s father is? Or anything about her mother?” He was a detective. Let him detect.

He looked at me with what could have been disguised amusement. “I’m not sure where that’s a police issue. Do you have reason to believe a crime was committed?”

“Maybe Fee was kidnapped,” I suggested.

“What reason do you have to think that?” he asked, looking at me with renewed interest.

“Creative thinking,” I admitted.

“Ah, yes. Creative thinking,” he said. “One of your many talents.”

Hmmm. Detective Haverton and I had shared one unexpected kiss recently. Was kissing one of my talents?

Before I could ask him, Ike came barreling up to me. “Rue,” he said, “I figured out exactly what to do to thank you. Are you free tonight?”

Detective Haverton got up. “Interesting,” he said, before he walked away.

Ike, who had seemed unaware of the man’s presence, suddenly stopped bouncing around like an enthusiastic puppy. “Did I interrupt something?” he asked me.

At the pace that Detective Haverton and I moved, we would both be in our eighties before we were doing anything worth interrupting.

"It's fine," I said to Ike.

"This is a really good idea," he said.

"What is it?" I asked.

"It's a surprise," he said. "Dress comfortably."

Comfortable I could do.

"Can you meet me at the dance studio at 7:00?" he asked.

No. I needed to put a stop to this right now. "Ike, I'm telling you right now, I'm not dancing. Plus," I reminded him, "I'm still healing from being shot."

I didn't need to specify that I'd been shot in the butt. It was, unfortunately, common knowledge in Fool's Hill.

"No dancing," he promised. "I've heard about you and dancing."

I couldn't even feign insult. I also couldn't think of another reason to refuse.

"Okay," I said reluctantly.

"This is going to be fun," Ike proclaimed as he left.

Interesting, was all I could think.

Chapter Eight

Since I did comfortable on a daily basis, all that I had to do to prepare to meet Ike was change into a clean pair of jeans and an unsweaty tee shirt. I did put on flats instead of sneakers, but that was the extent of my efforts. Oh, and I ran a brush through my hair and put on some Chapstick. Done.

I walked to the door of Maria Theresa's School of Dance and Tango Parlor with trepidation. Even though the business was closed and I clearly could not be coerced into some group situation, I still didn't like walking into a place that had "dance" as part of its name. Stoplight Diner: all good. There was nothing threatening there, just grilled cheese sandwiches and French fries and waffles and other delectables. Maria Theresa's School of Dance and Tango Parlor: looming humiliation and frustration. I had that same knot in the pit of my stomach that I got when I walked into the dentist's office.

I tried the door, which was locked, and then knocked lightly. Ike came bounding over, smiling broadly as he unlocked the door and then locked it behind me. I looked around in confusion. The reception area, where the cash register and

credit card reader resided along with seating for people waiting to pick up their kids after a class ended or whatever, was dimly lit. Looking beyond into the dance studio itself, all I could see was an empty room.

“Come into your thank you present,” Ike said. When I did, I realized that he had pulled a sofa and chair from the reception area into the room, and there was a table filled with snacks: Junior Mints, Sno Caps, popcorn, Twizzlers, and a bucket with an assortment of beer and sodas. At the back wall on the shelving there, I could see that there was an LCD projector hooked up to a laptop. The opposing wall was covered with mirrors, but there were black velvet drapes on a long rod that could be slid over the mirrors to create a moody tango parlor when the occasion arose. The drapes were closed, and hanging over the rod was a large white bed sheet.

“It’s your own private movie theatre,” Ike said happily. “You can stretch out on the sofa and get comfortable, you have an assortment of food, and you can rattle wrappers, talk, move around, or do whatever you want without annoying anybody.”

“I see,” I said neutrally. “Do I get to choose the movie?” I wasn’t a huge movie buff, and my mind was racing to come up with a choice.

“I thought about that, but no. I picked the movie.” Ike looked quite pleased with himself.

Ike had been born and raised in New York; somehow I imagined that he would have opted for some kind of tough guy movie – Scarface, or Fight Club, or maybe one of the Godfather movies since he used to work for a man who was now in Ryker’s Prison on organized crime charges. I’d never seen any of those movies except for the first Godfather film. The horse head made me avoid all of the sequels.

I don't like violence, whether real or depicted, so I started to think of excuses for leaving early. Why didn't Leah and I have one of those arrangements where I sent her a code, and she called me with a fake emergency that required my immediate presence?

"I know you're going to love this movie," Ike said. "I bet you've already seen it, but it holds up to repeated viewings. I bet I've seen it at least twenty times."

I very rarely re-read books other than the ones I taught in my English classes because there was such a huge stack of other ones I wanted to explore. Watch a movie twenty times? Not happening in my lifetime.

I couldn't decide between Junior Mints and Sno Caps, so I took both, along with a Coke. Ike had missed it by not providing my beloved Diet Coke, but maybe it was a backwards compliment, a way of saying that I didn't need to cut calories. What he didn't realize was that I found a weird enjoyment in the artificial aftertaste.

Ike did whatever technological things he needed to do and settled in the chair, leaving the entire sofa to me. I put my feet up, eased myself into a comfortable position, and prepared for the worst.

Imagine my surprise when I immediately recognized what filled the makeshift screen and boomed from the studio's sound system: Grease. Ike had been right; I had seen it. I actually didn't like the message: turn from a "Sandra Dee" into a "T-Bird" to impress a boy, but the singing and dancing were infectious. Okay. I could enjoy this. Other than some bullying and a drag race, there really wasn't any violence.

As it turned out, the movie was only a part of the entertainment. Within seconds of the start of the movie, Ike was out of his chair and dancing around the studio like a lunatic. He had some of Travolta's moves, but much of what he did was his own invention. And he sang. Here's the thing – he was a terrible singer. He was rarely anywhere near the key, but that didn't matter given his enthusiasm. He sang everything – boys' parts, girls' parts, it didn't matter. One moment he was Danny, and the next he was Sandy, and the next he was Rizzo. He swayed to "Look at Me, I'm Sandra Dee," and he gyrated to "Greased Lightnin'." He emoted to "There Are Worse Things I Could Do," and he twisted to "Hound Dog."

I was amazed to find myself on my feet joining him in "Born to Hand Jive," which reduced both of us to laughter at our inability to sustain the fast tempo.

I realized when the final credits rolled – I always watch the final credits – that somehow Ike had provided exactly what I needed. I had laughed, and I had relaxed. I hadn't spent one moment wondering about the identity of my grandfather or the location of my grandmother. It was a relief. I also realized that without the need to make polite conversation, or what passed for polite conversation with me, I had simply had fun.

Then I figured out something else: Ike had just given me a glimpse of what he had been like as that middle school boy who decided to actually dance at the school dances. He was exuberant and goofy, and he was not constrained by what people might think.

"Thank you, Ike," I said. "That was amazing."

He threw his exhausted body into the chair. After all, he had just had a two hour aerobic workout. "Best movie ever made," he said.

"You know," I said, my mind kicking into gear, "you've really got something here."

"What I've got is a mess. Don't worry, Rue. I know I can't sing, and my dancing isn't Travolta-caliber."

"I think that's the point," I said, sorting through my thoughts. "You just let it rip, and that's the fun of it." I looked at him appraisingly. "I think you could be really successful if you hosted movie parties here."

"What?" he asked. "People can do this in their houses. I just wanted more space."

"That's the reason this works," I said, getting more excited about my inspiration. "What if it were a kids' birthday party? A parent would be happy to rent out this space. Here's the fun part – before the movie started, you could teach the kids some of the dance moves that appear in the movie. Think something from Frozen. Then when the right time came, they could all join in." I didn't want to admit that most likely the kids would be bouncing off the walls the whole time. Somehow I didn't think that would bother him considering his own recent performance. He'd be bouncing right along with them. "And what about bridal showers or a girls' nights out? A bunch of women who get together and sing and dance and recite lines from their favorite movie? Think Mamma Mia! Think Saturday Night Fever."

"Or definitely think Grease." Ike paced around the studio, deep in thought.

“Definitely Grease,” I agreed. “You could also get some basic food – maybe pizza, maybe something simple from the diner.” I reined in my enthusiasm for a moment. “You’d have to check the legality of using the movies to make money, but there’s got to be a way.”

Ike bounded over to the sofa and leaned down. He embraced me in an awkward hug. “You, Rue, are the best thinking partner in the world. Here I was, trying to thank you for your great idea about the dance and etiquette classes, and now I owe you more thanks for coming up with dance movie events. Maria Theresa is going to love this. Maybe we could do Evita.”

“My work here is done,” I said, getting up. “Thank you for introducing me to your younger self.”

“Younger self?” Ike asked. “What are you talking about? This is just me.”

“How refreshing,” I said with a smile. Then I had to chuckle. “I can’t imagine why Maria Theresa’s ex-husband ever thought you’d make a good body guard or spy or whatever you were supposed to be.”

“I do have another side to me,” Ike said.

I laughed. “Can that one sing?”

Chapter Nine

My father and I went to the diner the next morning, and while he read the sports page, bemoaning the latest collapse of the Phillies' bullpen, I texted Leah to see if she could meet me to check out the progress upstairs. I figured we should make a list of what I needed to buy for Elijah Wu's refurbished living area, and I was curious to see what she had in mind for Forrest's office. It turned out that Fee was waitressing again, filling in for the woman whose son was still suspended from day care.

Great. That kid would probably end up in my high school English class one day.

Fee stopped to chat for a moment after delivering our coffee and Diet Coke. "I just don't know what to think. Rue, I need to tell you that I understand better than I did before about how it feels to suddenly have your image of your family changed head over heels. I owe you a huge apology."

Yes, you do, I thought, but it won't change anything. "I know that we're both adults and it shouldn't really matter, but it does." I was thirty-seven, and this whole

family turmoil had truly jolted me. I had to imagine that even though Fee was into her sixties, it would still matter to her.

“I would never say that Lew was a great father, but he was the only one I had,” Fee said. “In a really weird way, though, it’s kind of a relief.”

I stared at her appraisingly. I wasn’t expecting that. “What do you mean?” All I knew was that if I found out that my father wasn’t my father, it would rip my heart out.

“I’ve always worried that there was some gene for being a cheat, for looking at people as targets for the next scam. I worried that I was destined to become the next generation in the con artist family tradition, as if that were born into my nature.”

If that were true, then there was no need to worry about the nature vs. nurture controversy; she had it both ways.

“For all those years you were living in Europe, did you ever scam people?” I asked, earning narrowed eyes of disapproval from my father but ignoring them.

“No,” Fee said. “Actually, I earned an honest wage by working hard and treating people well.”

“There you have it,” I declared. “No worries.”

“It was more than that,” Fee said. “I grew up always moving around, relocating after one grand scheme in order to launch the next one in a new place. I thought that was born into me, too, that I would never be content settling into one location. I thought I was meant to be rootless and restless.”

Rather than staying in Fool's Hill with your husband and daughter, I thought. Mindful of my father, though, I didn't say it. What I did say was equally undiplomatic. "Guess it was just you."

Fee looked at me. "I guess it was the expectation I had for myself."

"Fee," my father said suddenly, "there's something I'd like to ask you."

Both of us looked at him with startled expressions. Throughout this whole reunion, he had been the one to mainly sit back and absorb information.

"Anything, Ray," Fee said softly. "There's nothing you can't ask me."

"How would you have felt if you'd come back and I was with another woman, maybe had given Rue some sisters and brothers along the way?"

I was stunned that my father had asked such an emotion-laden question. I'd imagined he'd ask something like, "How will it work with Social Security if all of your working years were in Europe?" or "Do you need to renew your driver's license?"

I saw Fee take a deep breath. "It's what I expected, Ray. You are such a good and loving man that I fully expected another woman would have swooped you up. It was a pain I anticipated and deserved."

"And what about you?" I asked, even though I should not have intruded on what suddenly seemed like a private conversation between my father and Fee. "Any long-time loves? Kids?"

Fee looked at me and shook her head. "Let's just say that after royally screwing up my first attempt at commitment, I didn't feel qualified to try it again. I met some very interesting people in my travels, but that's what they were – travels. I didn't settle down in one place long enough to let anything develop. And kids? No. I

had nothing to offer – no stable home, no confidence that I could do better the second time than I did the first. I was a terrible mother to you, Rue. I will never stop feeling guilty about that.”

“It’s not like you beat me,” I had to admit.

“No, but I abandoned you, and maybe that’s worse.”

I thought about that one. “I think beating might be worse.”

“Thank you for saying that,” Fee said, and then she saw the waving hand of one of the customers. “Roger needs more ketchup for his hash browns. One bottle just won’t do for that man.”

I looked at my father, who was blocking his face with the sports page, suddenly absorbed in it again. “You and Fee?” I asked, unable to add any more words.

“Leave it, Rue,” my father said. “Did you see that the Phillies might bring up that young pitcher who’s tearing it up in the minor leagues?”

It was a relief to see Leah walk in the front door of the diner. She gave my father a hug before she slid into the booth beside me. “Good morning, C-Dad,” she said, using her abbreviation for Callison Dad, her compromise for not wanting to usurp my role as his one and only daughter even though he had adopted her in his heart, as she had him. “How are your Phillies doing?” Leah didn’t care a whit about baseball, but because she loved my father, she endured his lengthy dissertations on the joys and woes of his favorite team.

Just to make things clear, I actually did love the Phillies, and I could hold my own in any conversation about them. I didn’t merely smile or commiserate like Leah did.

Not that I'm claiming superiority over Leah. It's just that I was a better sports fan. Of course, Leah baked him white chocolate chip cookies and made him decadent loaded nachos to eat when it was Eagles' season, so there was that.

"Upstairs," I said to Leah, pointing toward the stairs at the back of the diner before my father could begin filling her in on the new pitching prospect.

"Tell me what you have planned for Forrest's office," I said as I unlocked the door at the top of the stairs.

"I was really torn," Leah said. "It's a bit unusual for clients to go see their financial person on the second floor of a diner, so I figured his office needed to go in one of two directions. It could be very casual and kitschy and fun, or it could be somber and dignified to offset the location."

"Are you embarrassed that his office is over the diner?" I asked, feeling protective about my eating establishment. It wasn't fancy, but it was homey and friendly and affordable and had perfect waffles. I considered it an honor to co-own it with my father. "I mean, Forrest is welcome to look for office space somewhere else – somewhere more dignified."

Leah clasped her hands over her mouth. "Oh Rue, I'm so sorry. I would never, ever show disrespect for your diner. I love the Stoplight Diner, and Forrest and I are incredibly grateful that you offered him space for an office in exchange for handling your diner's finances. In fact, it was the pleasure he took in helping you with the insurance and payroll and ordering and taxes and all the rest of it that made him so sure that he wanted to open his own office and continue to help you and other small

businesses.” Leah’s words were pouring out, and she was staring at me with large, anguished eyes.

“Leah, it’s all right. No offense taken,” I assured her. “Trust me when I say that neither my father nor I have any interest in dealing with the issues that Forrest is handling for us. We’re thrilled to have him.”

“Okay,” Leah said, exhaling. “I’d never forgive myself if I messed this up for him.”

“So what did you decide? Chickens and old Coca Cola signs, or mahogany and oriental rugs for the office?”

“Cherry,” she said.

“Cola or wood?”

“Definitely wood,” she said with a laugh. “Cherry fruit décor would look too much like a Las Vegas slot machine.”

I hadn’t thought of that, which shows why I shouldn’t be trusted with interior design. The door to what would soon be Forrest’s office was open, and I peered in. The walls were already painted a deep wine color, and the impact was startling. There was a glossy white chair rail, white crown molding at the ceiling, and the one window was already covered with a wide-slatted wooden blind. Leah moved over to the window and raised the blind. “I’ve already ordered an area rug with navy and dark green and burgundy and a bit of gold,” she said. “Over here will be his cherry desk, and there will be bookcases on the wall behind it. In front of the desk there will be two client chairs, dark leather to coordinate with the cherry desk. There will be a plant on the windowsill, and a floor lamp to supplement the overhead lighting.

The big decision left to make is what artwork to put on the walls. That's critical because if it isn't right, the office could look stuffy and boring. What do you think, Rue?"

"You're asking advice from me?" I asked with a laugh. "This whole office is your vision. You've got this, Leah."

"But I've thought and thought and looked at a thousand sites on line, and I can't find the right thing. It can't be some old print that looks like it belongs in a hunt club."

"No dogs and pheasants and people on horseback?"

"No," Leah said in horror.

"I bet you could convince Elijah Wu to share one of the paint-by-number masterpieces from his area, as long as you don't ask for The Last Supper," I suggested, my voice serious. "For reasons I can't explain, he's very fond of that one."

"No," Leah said, her horror even greater.

"How about a framed portrait of you?" I suggested.

"Rue, you are not being helpful."

"It's hard to be helpful when you keep shooting down all of my inspirations," I said with wounded dignity. "Ike likes my ideas."

"Oh does he?" Leah asked, suddenly alert and distracted from office décor.

"Do tell."

"Nope," I said with a smile. "Not until we settle the wall art issue." I gave it a moment's serious thought. "I've got it," I announced.

"For real this time?"

“How dare you doubt me?” I asked. “Think about it – this is Fool’s Hill.”

“Yes, it is,” Leah said cautiously. It was yet another reminder of what a nice person Leah was. I would have definitely said something snarky.

“So what if we took some really cool photographs of Fool’s Hill and framed them? Then locals would have something recognizable, and other people would just see interesting photographs.”

Leah’s face lit up. “Maybe a picture of the front of Uncle Goose’s hardware store,” she said. “And could we take a picture at dawn or dusk of your pond? And maybe one of those wood ducks that are nesting there?”

“You know what would be fun, too? I bet we could get Elijah Wu to take aerial shots with his drone. People would have a good time finding their own properties or landmarks they know.”

“Rue, you’re brilliant,” Leah proclaimed happily.

“I’ve been told that quite a bit lately,” I said with phony modesty.

“Did I hear my name?” Elijah Wu said, appearing behind us. His appearance startled me – his face was dripping with sweat, and he was covered with some pasty substance that made him look like he had leprosy.

“What’s wrong with you?” I asked.

“What?” His face was a mask of confusion. “Oh, this?” He swiped at what appeared to be a piece of brightly colored paper stuck to his forehead. “I’m helping steam off the wallpaper in the bathroom.”

“That’s a relief,” I said. “I thought you had contracted some tropical fungus.” Then I smiled. “Actually, it’s a relief in several ways. That wallpaper was nightmare-inducing.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” Elijah Wu said.

“It was,” I insisted. “Those flowers were bigger than dinner plates. It was like having a bathroom straight out of Little Shop of Horrors.”

Little Shop of Horrors. That was another movie Ike could use. I didn’t remember much dancing in it, but it had clever music.

“Little Shop of Horrors?” Elijah Wu asked.

These young’uns. Elijah Wu might be a genius, but he was twenty-one and had no cultural literacy.

Leah immediately told him about my photography inspiration, and Elijah Wu said that the aerial shots would be no problem. Since his drone could already record video, it would be a matter of capturing a still shot from that. While Leah and he discussed possible locations, I wandered into the rest of the second floor. The contractors had already made amazing progress. After they had pulled together to rebuild my father’s and my house, they had then helped us renovate the diner, then convert the second floor of Uncle Goose’s hardware store into a living space for him, and now they were working here. The way I figured, we were good for business and they were good to us.

The walls in the rest of the second floor were already painted a soft gray, and the vinyl plank flooring had been installed. It looked like the kitchen was ready to have the white subway tile backsplash installed, and the bathroom renovation had

begun, which would feature more white subway tile along with a gray and white geometric tile on the floor.

One of the workers stuck his head out of the bathroom. He looked just as bad as Elijah Wu. “Hey, Rue,” he said, swiping floral wallpaper out of his hair. “I found a great buy on a piece of quartz. Want it for the kitchen counter? I can get you a really good price.”

“Absolutely,” I said. “That would be perfect.” I could already imagine light glinting off the quartz, adding life to the space. “That’s worth free burgers for life.”

“Deal,” he said. “I’ll see if I can find anything else good so that I can get free fries, too.”

Leah and I finally finished our inspection, measuring windows for blinds that we decided would match the one she’d already gotten for Forrest’s office, and figuring out the sofa dimensions that the living area could handle. She approved of the area rug I’d bought, and we discussed ways to add pops of navy to break up the gray and white.

Our planning was interrupted when Fee stuck her head in from the hallway that ran along the side of Forrest’s office. “Rue, the Brain Trust is here,” she said. “They want to talk to you.” Message delivered, she went back down the stairs.

I sighed. “Leah, stay with me,” I said. “I’m not sure I’m ready for this.”

Leah looked at her Mickey Mouse watch. “I’m so sorry. I have an appointment to get my teeth cleaned.”

I swear she looked relieved.

Chapter Ten

Miss Henflinger, Mr. Barnes, and Ms. LeBon were seated at the round table in the front of the diner. Even though it wasn't their normal lunchtime meeting time, they had still claimed their traditional location. So well known were these three elders that if other people had been sitting there when the trio arrived, I was sure they have promptly moved.

"Sit down, Rue," Miss Henflinger said imperiously. "I understand that there is no genetic relationship between the body discovered on your property and either you or Fiona."

That body had been buried there, totally unbeknownst to my father, thirty-four years ago, the same day that Fee had walked out on my father and me. It had certainly been stirring up its share of drama ever since.

"Correct," I answered.

"Even though a participant in the burial has unequivocally stated that the man was Lewis Flynn, whom Fiona thought was her biological father."

“Correct,” I said again. I wasn’t sure why Miss Henflinger needed me since she had all the information.

“So what is the issue here?” Miss Henflinger asked.

“Issue?” I repeated.

Miss Henflinger looked at me like I was still the befuddled math student she had once taught. “What matters here? What information needs to be uncovered?”

“You are asking the wrong person,” Ms. LeBon snapped. “This is an issue for Fee, not Rue.”

“Hey, wait a minute,” I protested. “This is my family tree as well. This is my genetic inheritance. It impacts me, too, to know the identity of my grandparents. For all I know, they might be alive, and I could meet them.”

“Is that important to you, Ruelle?” Miss Henflinger asked. She abhorred nicknames. Even though I would never dare to use it, I knew her first name was Lillian, and I bet she was never a Lil or a Lily.

I didn’t want to admit to Ms. LeBon that I was pretty well exhausted with all of this family drama and would be okay with not knowing my mother’s biological parents. “Maybe,” I hedged.

“I repeat,” Ms. LeBon said, “the important person here is Fee.”

Mr. Barnes tried to interrupt this argument circle. “Do you think Fee is interested in learning more about the man she thought was her father and how she ended up living with him, or do you think she would want to know the identity of her biological father?”

“And what about her mother?” I asked. “Wouldn’t it be good to know if the woman who raised her is actually her mother? Did she live with one of her biological parents or neither of them?”

With that, Fee herself swooped up to the table. “Good morning,” she said brightly. “What can I bring you?”

“Which part of your parentage interests you?” Miss Henflinger asked.

I could see the startled look on Fee’s face. Here she was expecting something like, “I’ll have a toasted English muffin,” and instead she got that question.

“Excuse me?” she said.

“Here are three possibilities,” Miss Henflinger continued. “1. More information about the man who raised you, Lewis Flynn. 2. The identity of your biological father. 3. Information about whether Lewis Flynn’s wife was your biological mother. Of course, if the answer to number 3 is no, then that raises a fourth possibility: the identity of your birth mother.”

Fee plopped down in an empty chair. Miss Henflinger was a lot, especially if you weren’t used to her. She liked to get right to the heart of the matter without any, as she would call it, dillydallying.

“I guess the most important thing would be to find out the identity of my mother. She should then be able to provide information about the other questions,” she finally said. “She would know the identity of my father.” She suddenly got an appalled look on her face. “At least I hope she would know that.”

“Good choice,” Miss Henflinger said. “I’ll have fresh orange juice and an order of toast, well-browned but not burned, with butter and strawberry jelly.”

Fee got back on her feet and looked at the rest of us. I waved her off; the other two ordered, and Fee walked away, shaking her head.

“Martin,” Miss Henflinger said briskly to Mr. Barnes, “you need to start your research.”

“I don’t have much to go on here,” Mr. Barnes said. Today he was wearing a green bowtie with orange carrots on it, which struck me as an unusual fashion choice. I can’t imagine going into a store, looking over a selection of neckwear, and choosing a bowtie with carrots.

Ms. LeBon interrupted their conversation by wheeling on me. “Rue, you should be ashamed of yourself.”

“Me? Why? I didn’t cause any of this. Remember that Fee walked out on my father and me when I was three. It’s not my fault I don’t have any memories or information about my grandparents, whomever they are.”

“Not that,” Ms. LeBon said impatiently, “I mean Fee. She is your mother, and you have her working here at this diner like she is your employee or something. It’s demeaning to her. What is wrong with you?”

I didn’t know where to begin. I took a deep breath, but it didn’t help calm me. “First of all, I didn’t ask Fee to work here. She volunteered. She came in when several waitresses were in an accident, and today she’s filling in for one who has childcare issues. Neither my father nor I asked her to do this. Second of all, it isn’t demeaning to be a waitress. It’s honest work, and it’s what she did in Europe during all of the years when she was gone. Third of all, she’s really good at it and seems to take pride in that.”

Wait. Was I defending Fee? How did that happen? Usually I was trying not to attack her.

“It simply isn’t right,” Ms. LeBon insisted, not backing down in the presence of my impressively organized points. “No parent should work for her daughter.”

“Then no woman should work for the husband she abandoned, either,” I retorted.

Miss Henflinger was watching our exchange with her head cocked to one side. I had a desperate need to ask her which of us had won, but I decided I didn’t want to hear her verdict. I also wanted to ask her why Ms. LeBon disliked me so intensely, but I wasn’t sure I wanted to hear the answer to that, either. It might be that I was simply an annoying person. Then I’d have to try to get Leah to come back from the dentist’s office to serve as a character witness. This could get messy.

I stewed while Miss Henflinger and Mr. Barnes calmly discussed possibilities for searching for Fee’s mother, either biological or otherwise. When Fee returned with Miss Henflinger’s toast, perfectly browned, and the orders for Mr. Barnes and Ms. LeBon, I pounced. “Fee, do you find it demeaning to work here?”

I had a feeling she was ready to turn the table over to another waitress and refuse to return. “Demeaning?” she asked. “Why would I find it demeaning? I love being a waitress. Why are you asking me that? Have I done anything to give you that impression?”

Bus, meet Ms. LeBon. “Oh, Ms. LeBon said that it was demeaning for you to have to work here for my father and me.”

Fee turned to Ms. LeBon. "Surely you misunderstand, Cecille. I love the time I work here. It makes me feel productive and helpful. I'm grateful that Ray and Rue let me do it."

Hah. Grateful. I wanted to leap to my feet, point at Ms. LeBon, and make mocking noises. I settled for something a bit more mature. "That doesn't sound like a demeaned woman to me." Fee looked from Ms. LeBon to me and then left to deal with less combative customers.

"You put her on the spot," Ms. LeBon insisted. "What was she supposed to say?"

"Drop it, Cecille," Miss Henflinger said sharply.

Victory was mine, or at least as close to a victory as I was likely to get.

"Rue, you need to ask your father if he can remember anything about Fee's parents. Cecille, you need to ask Fee if she has any guesses about where her mother was likely to have gone once her husband disappeared, perhaps a location she especially liked."

"Fee told me that her mother was subservient to her husband, and that she had no contact with her once she left Fool's Hill," I said, trying to be helpful.

"She may have more information than she's willing to share with you," Ms. LeBon said, and once again I wanted to launch into her. Unfortunately, I couldn't come up with a good argument. After all, Fee and Ms. LeBon had been in touch through all the years of her absence while my father and I hadn't even known that she was alive.

I guess it was fortunate that distraction arrived because my mind was racing with arguments I could use to make her see that even though she was Fee's best friend, I was her daughter.

I had the DNA test results to prove that.

I forgot about all of that, though, when Maria Theresa made a dramatic entrance into the diner. Fortunately, the table where we were seated was in the front so she didn't have to promenade down the entire center aisle.

"You," she hissed, throwing an envelope down in front of Ms. LeBon.

"Moi?" Ms. LeBon said innocently, her on-again off-again French accent making a cameo appearance.

"Oh, cut the crap," Maria Theresa said, her hiss becoming louder. She pointed a long, lacquered red fingernail at the envelope. "You know you are one behind this."

I looked around. Where were Ike and Jake? How did she keep escaping from them when they were supposed to be keeping an eye on her?

"I have no idea about this . . . missive," Ms. LeBon said, flicking the envelope with a dismissive finger.

"Then how did you know it was a missive?" Maria Theresa asked.

"That is an envelope," Ms. LeBon said calmly. "Envelopes typically enclose missives."

I wanted to disagree just for spite, but I restrained myself. After all, an envelope could contain a bill, a newspaper clipping, a photograph, money – any number of flat things. I looked at this particular envelope and saw that the name "Archibald" was printed in neat block letters on it.

In pink ink, I might note.

Here we went. Archibald Zooper, Maria Theresa, and Ms. LeBon: the love triangle that simply wouldn't quit.

"You lost," Maria Theresa said, stamping her foot. "He chose me."

"Perhaps I did not want him," Ms. LeBon said, flinging her scarf over her shoulder.

"You still want him," Maria Theresa said, grabbing the envelope off the table and pulling out the piece of paper inside. She began to read, dramatically over-emoting: "My dear Archie, I wish you the best in your new endeavor. Any success this dance emporium has will be due to you."

Okay. So that was problematic for Maria Theresa on both personal and professional levels.

"Is there a signature?" Mr. Barnes asked quietly. "A postmark?"

"Of course not," Maria Theresa said. "It was slipped under the door of MY business. It is Maria Theresa's School of Dance and Tango Parlor, not Maria Theresa and Archibald Zooper's School of Dance and Tango Parlor."

Thank heavens for that. I already thought the name was a mouthful without adding Archibald Zooper to it.

"Without a signature or even a postmark, how are you certain of its author?" Mr. Barnes asked calmly.

"I know it is her," Maria Theresa said with deadly ferocity.

I wanted to tell her that technically it should be “it is she” since “is” is a linking verb, not a transitive verb, but I stopped myself. I was enjoying this confrontation so much that I could overlook grammatical inaccuracies.

“How?” Mr. Barnes asked.

“She is the only woman with so little self-respect that she would chase after a man who has already dismissed her.”

Dismissed her. I liked that. It sounded like the end-of-day school bell had rung on Ms. LeBon’s relationship with Archibald Zooper.

“He is a man of many mysteries,” Ms. LeBon said calmly. “You think you know him, but what do you really know? How do you know what he does when he leaves you at night?”

It was all I could do to not burst out laughing. I admit that Archibald Zooper had an engaging twinkle in his eyes, but I still hold that he would be hired in a heartbeat as a body double for Danny DeVito. I couldn’t envision him sneaking around under cover of darkness.

“You are an evil woman,” Maria Theresa said, her voice escalating. “Plus you dress weird.”

Okay, this was not going in a good direction. If this were happening in a high school, this was when the crowd would begin to gather in anticipation of some hair-pulling. What happened to grown woman being wise enough to support each other, not get into catfights?

Actually, that was an insult to Caterina. She would not behave like this. Maria Theresa was hissing more than Caterina had in her entire little feline life. Of course,

she had bopped Miss Henflinger's cat, Henry, on the nose the first time she met him, but that had been necessary to set the ground rules.

Before I had to seriously consider intervening, Ike and Jake charged in. The last time they'd had to get her out of the diner, they'd told her there was a gas leak. I couldn't wait to see what they'd come up with this time.

"Mary Terry," Jake said, "is there an issue?"

Maria Theresa flapped the envelope at him. "This is the issue. This woman's missive is the issue." She pointed dramatically at Ms. LeBon, her gesture extending from her arm to her hand to her fingertips.

Jake and Ike read the note.

"Not cool," Jake said to Ms. LeBon.

"Not mine," Ms. LeBon said.

That actually wasn't bad for an enigmatic response. After all, if she had written the missive, it technically was no longer hers since she had given it to dear Archie.

"Don't bother yourself with this," Jake said, and he and Ike closed in on either side of Maria Theresa. "There's a newspaper reporter who wants to do an article on you."

"Oh," Maria Theresa said, running her hands through her hair and straightening the low neck of her blouse. "Of course. Is there a photographer, too?"

Ike looked back over his shoulder as he and Jake ushered the woman out. "Sorry," he mouthed. "She's tricky."

I simply shook my head in response.

Miss Henflinger did not look amused. “Why on earth do you do these things, Cecille?”

“Because I can,” Ms. LeBon said. “It reassures me that I still have it.”

I wasn’t sure what “it” was, but I wished she would keep it out of the Stoplight Diner.

Chapter Eleven

No more had Maria Theresa left with Ike and Jake than another distraction arrived.

It certainly was a morning for big personalities.

Isabel Louise came barging in the front door of the diner. I was surprised to see her back again so soon; after all, it was quite a drive from her home in Pennsylvania to Fool's Hill. I was also very aware about the lure, and it wasn't any of us sitting at the table.

The big question: was Isabel Louise here because she wanted to be around Elijah Wu, or was she here because she wanted to prove to him that she could come up with a better hydraulic pontoon system for his drone?

With Isabel Louise, I wasn't sure there was much of a difference between the two.

"I need to see Elijah Wu," she said, directing her demand to me.

"He's otherwise occupied right now," I said, smiling at the memory of the sweaty wallpaper remover I had seen earlier.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Isabel Louise snapped.

“Young lady, have a seat,” Miss Henflinger said in her best teacher voice. It was the same tone that said, “The bell does not dismiss you. I dismiss you,” and thirty students ready to bolt out the door sat right back down.

Isabel Louise sat.

Actually, she and Miss Henflinger had done well together during the time Isabel Louise had lived in Fool’s Hill to finish her senior year. She had felt uncomfortable at Ms. LeBon’s house, despite the fact that she was her great-great-aunt, because at that time, Ms. LeBon and Archibald Zooper had been totally infatuated with each other.

Isabel Louise did not have a lot of tolerance for romantic foolishness, and she had ended up living at Miss Henflinger’s house instead. At first I had considered them to be unlikely roommates, but they were both forthright, no-nonsense, intelligent people, and I had seen both respect and affection grow between them.

Okay, so maybe affection was over-stating it, but I would hold strong on the respect.

“I am your aunt,” Ms. LeBon said imperiously. “Did your parents not teach you to respect your elders, especially when they are related to you?”

She was Isabel Louise’s great-great aunt, but I wasn’t going to quibble.

“Hello, Aunt Cecille,” Isabel Louise said with barely disguised disdain. “How are you today?”

“Fine, thank you. And you?” Ms. LeBon responded.

I was getting bored. When Ike taught etiquette to young boys, he was going to have to make it more interesting than this.

Isabel Louise was clearly done with it, too. “Ms. Callison, with what is Elijah Wu occupied?”

Good girl, not ending the sentence with “with.”

“Helping a contractor strip wallpaper,” I answered.

Isabel Louise reached down and hefted a bulky box onto the table, nearly knocking over Miss Henflinger’s orange juice in the process. “This is much more important.”

“Patience,” I said calmly. “The bathroom is small, so it shouldn’t take much longer.”

“I am not a patient person,” Isabel Louise declared.

Such self-awareness at a young age. I wonder what clued her in to this character trait? The fact that she irritated most of the people she encountered? Or was it her desire to complete college in two years? “You have no choice,” I said with a smile. “I co-own this place, and I want the wallpaper stripped. I’m not going to let you distract Elijah Wu.”

“Distract him?” Isabel Louise snorted. “I have a prototype for a hydraulic pontoon system for his drone that is better than anything he’s designed. I’m going to make him bow down in awe of me.”

I doubted that, but she’d have to wait a bit to find out.

Miss Henflinger entered the fray. “What will you major in at Swarthmore?” she asked. “I certainly hope that it will be Mathematics.”

“Or French,” Ms. LeBon added.

I didn’t add that I hoped she would be an English major. In all honesty, even though she was highly intelligent, she’d be a bad English major. Studying literature was all about shades of interpretation, and Isabel Louise was a right/wrong kind of girl. Besides, she’d have to take at least one creative writing class, and Isabel Louise was not fond of flights of fancy. Facts were her fodder for thought.

“Swarthmore College allows its students to design their own major,” Isabel Louise said. “I plan to combine Biochemistry, Anthropology, Engineering, and Peace & Conflict Studies.”

I had expected an eclectic combination, but this boggled my mind. I didn’t even know there was a course of study called Peace & Conflict Studies. Why did I think Isabel Louise would ace the conflict part but struggle with the peace part? I couldn’t help myself. “Have you considered adding Theatre?”

“Theatre?” Isabel Louise asked. “Why would I do that?”

Just to amuse me, I wanted to say. “It improves one’s presentation skills,” I said. “Besides, it would exercise a different part of your brain.”

Isabel Louise looked at me appraisingly. “I’ll take that under advisement.”

Just out of curiosity, I asked, “Has Swarthmore approved your combination of majors?”

“Not yet,” Isabel Louise said with a frown. “They are trying to tell me that I can’t combine four, but I’m threatening to sue them if they don’t honor my needs.”

And right there was the reason why Swarthmore would let Isabel Louise do whatever it took to graduate in two years. Their bucolic campus wouldn't be able to handle any more of her than that.

I thought about the difference between Isabel Louise and Elijah Wu. She was bright, but it was necessary to her to lead with that. She needed to make sure that everybody in her path was aware of her intellectual superiority. Elijah Wu was even brighter, but he was easy to be around. He could hang out with the Stoplight Diner staff or me or my dad or Uncle Goose and never make us feel inferior. What made them so different?

Maybe it was because Elijah Wu was confident without being cocky. He believed that eventually he would come up with his one big idea that would change the world and make him rich; until then, he was willing to simply absorb whatever was around him, adding it to his knowledge bank. I had no doubt that while he was steaming off the wallpaper, his mind was designing a better steam machine or a chemical that would instantly dissolve the wallpaper without damaging the wall under it.

That must mean that Isabel Louise lacked confidence. Beneath her abrasive exterior there just might lurk an insecure girl who had often been left behind while her parents went off to study obscure languages, a girl who had learned to deal with her lack of friends by alienating others before they could reject her.

Maybe she and I both had some abandonment issues. I was the lucky one who had been loved unconditionally by my father and who had found my calling in a high school English classroom. Isabel Louise hadn't found her safe place yet.

“Well?” Isabel Louise was staring at me, and I realized my mind had taken yet another unauthorized field trip.

“Well what?” I had to ask.

“When may I see Elijah Wu?”

“Let me go upstairs and check on the progress,” I said.

“I’ll go with you,” Isabel Louise insisted.

We both shoved back our chairs at the same time. Unfortunately, neither of us was aware that Fee was directly behind us, and we rammed into her. There was a loud crash as dishes shattered on the floor. I wheeled around to see Fee wearing the contents of a pitcher of sweet tea. It was dripping down her face and soaking into her shirt.

“I’m so sorry,” I said, reaching for the napkins on the table to help her mop off.

“I’m just glad it wasn’t hot coffee,” Fee said. “Accidents happen.” That must be one of the reasons why Fee was such a good waitress. I would have been yelping and most likely cursing.

Fee was smiling as she pulled her shirt up a bit and began to wring it out.

“Everything’s washable, including me.”

Isabel Louise was staring at Fee, her mouth agape.

I hoped she was about to add her apology to mine since both of us had been responsible for the collision.

“What is that?” Isabel Louise blurted instead.

Chapter Twelve

“What is what?” Fee asked pleasantly, continuing to wring out her shirt from the deluge of sweet tea that Isabel Louise and I had caused. “This is sweet tea I’m wearing.”

“No, that birthmark on your side,” Isabel Louise said, staring fixedly at the small slice of skin exposed by Fee’s shirt-wringing.

“Isabel Louise,” I said sharply. “Fee is being kind enough not to yell at us for causing this collision, so she’s entitled to good manners from you, not random questions about her anatomy.”

Isabel Louise totally ignored me. “Look,” she said, pulling up her own tee shirt a bit. “I have the exact same one.”

I stared from Fee’s side to Isabel Louise’s, and sure enough, they both had matching birthmarks. It was unusual – a circle with two smaller circles perched on top, like ears.

“My mother calls this my mouse mark,” Isabel Louise said. “She has the same one.”

My mind was racing, but I didn't know where it was heading. "What causes birthmarks?" I asked.

"I've researched it," Isabel Louise said. "In most cases, they're caused by vascular malformations or hyperpigmentation. In rare cases, however, they can be hereditary, and in even rarer cases, they can appear in the exact same location on related people."

"Is that so?" Miss Henflinger said, her brown furrowing. "And you say that your mother has the same birthmark?"

"Yes. We both have the same one in the same place, just like she does," she said, pointing to Fee. "My mother said that her great-grandmother had the same one. It's not like it shows up in every generation. It can skip around, miss a few, and then show up again."

"What a coincidence that Fee has the same one," I said, trying desperately to untangle the chaos in my brain.

"Considering the mathematics of genetics, that would be unlikely," Isabel Louise said calmly. She looked at Fee. "Are you sure we're not related?"

I could tell that this was a very disturbing question for someone who had just recently found out that her supposed father was not her biological kin. "To be honest, I'm not sure of much of anything these days," Fee said.

I'm not sure if it was a noise or a motion that made me turn my attention to Ms. LeBon. The woman was so pale that she looked transparent, and she was shaking like she had been put on ice. "Is it possible?" she murmured, but then she shook her head. "No. It couldn't be."

“What is it?” I asked her. “Do you have the same birthmark?”

“No,” she said softly. “No, I don’t.”

“Then why did you say, ‘Is it possible?’” I asked. “Is what possible?”

“I need to think,” Ms. LeBon said. “This is neither the time nor the place for that.”

I looked around at the customers surrounding us. None of them seemed to be paying us much attention, but eavesdropping was right up there with eating as favorite pastimes at the Stoplight Diner.

“It might not be the place, but it is the time,” I said.

“Why do you get to determine that?” Ms. LeBon asked, regaining a bit of her spirit.

“Because clearly something is going on. If it involves Fee, then it involves me.”

“What about me?” Isabel Louise asked.

“You’re welcome to join us,” I said.

“I’d rather meet with Elijah Wu and get filled in later,” the girl said. What was wrong with her? Didn’t she have any curiosity?

“Fine,” I said. I walked with her to the back of the diner and unlocked the door for her to go upstairs. “Make sure he finishes with the wallpaper first,” I insisted.

“You’re weird,” Isabel Louise said, but she had a bit of a smile. “What do you think’s going on with these birthmarks?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll find out,” I said. “You can be certain of that.”

I walked back to where Mya Hernandez and Fee were now cleaning up the broken dishes that Isabel Louise and I had caused. "Mya," I asked, "do you think you could cover for Fee while she leaves?"

"Of course," the girl said. "We're past the morning rush. You just take your time, Ms. Fee, and get yourself some clean clothes. I've got this."

"Thanks, Mya," I said.

I turned to the rest. "Where are we going?"

"My house," Miss Henflinger said firmly.

Fine. There were no eavesdroppers there other than Henry, the cat, and he knew how to keep a secret.

"I'll let you have a private conversation," Mr. Barnes said diplomatically.

"Nonsense," Miss Henflinger said. "We will undoubtedly need your research skills at some point. Your attendance is required, Martin." She looked at him sharply. "Please."

"Of course," Mr. Barnes said.

The Brain Trust and Fee headed out the front door, and I walked up the back steps to tell Elijah Wu that I was going out for a while and then went to the parking lot where my Prius awaited. I tried to stop my mind from racing. I needed more information. Whatever theories I came up with at this point were likely to be uninformed.

Right. Try telling that to a brain that caromed around as much as mine did. It was like telling an ice cream cone not to melt on a hot August day.

I parked on the street in front of Miss Henflinger's house and walked up to the door. She was waiting impatiently to open it for me, one foot tapping. I had been here many times before when the Brain Trust was in session, and she was also Caterina's designated cat sitter. I suddenly wished I had my cat with me to distract my thoughts.

Instead, I ran into Henry. The large orange cat had terrorized Anabelle's cat rescue, and he was in danger of being shipped out when he and Miss Henflinger met. It seemed that they had arrived at a way to peacefully coexist, and I had actually become quite fond of him. He tended to say something that sounded like "whee" in a tone of voice that was dripping with sarcasm.

What was not to like about a sarcastic "whee" cat?

"Hello, Henry," I said. "Whee?"

He looked at me like I was crazy and stalked away.

Fee, Ms. LeBon, and Mr. Barnes were already seated at the kitchen table, and Miss Henflinger and I joined them.

As usual, Miss Henflinger got right to it. "Cecille, it would appear that something has struck you. What is it?"

"I'm not ready to talk about it yet," Ms. LeBon replied. I wanted to shake her, so I sat on my hands.

"That is unfortunate," Miss Henflinger said, steel in her voice, "because you don't have a choice. Here we are. Here you are. You clearly have information that we need to know. Begin."

I truly enjoyed Miss Henflinger when I wasn't on the receiving end of her sternness. I looked expectantly at Ms. Lebon.

"Cecille," Mr. Barnes said gently, "it appears that Isabel Louise and Fee share the same birthmark, which may be a genetic marker. Since you are related to Isabel Louise, can you shed any light on this occurrence?"

"Maybe it's more frequent than we know," Ms. LeBon said, but then she collapsed, sagging her head onto the worn maple table, sobbing loudly.

Miss Henflinger sighed and got up to fetch a box of tissues. Fee slid her chair next to Ms. LeBon and put her arm around her. "Whatever it is, you can tell us," she said gently. "You're safe here."

Eventually Ms. LeBon's crying subsided. "It might not be what I'm thinking," she said, looking at Fee.

"Why don't you let us help you figure it out?" Fee said, her voice kind. "Besides, I think we already know everything about each other."

"Not this," Ms. LeBon said. "Not this."

Okay, so there was a secret that Ms. LeBon had not shared with her best friend, my long-missing mother, during their decades of weekly chats. This should be good.

"I've never told a soul about this," Ms. LeBon said.

"Confession is good for the soul," Miss Henflinger said firmly.

Ms. LeBon took a deep, shuddering breath. "I had an affair."

Cripes. Was this about Archibald Zooper? Maybe I really didn't want to hear about it. "Is this about Archibald Zooper?" I blurted out.

Ms. LeBon looked at me like I had sprouted antennae. “What are you talking about?” Then she settled herself again. “I was a first year teacher, on my own for the first time in my life. I fell in love. I saw him look at me, and I knew he was looking at me as a woman, not as a teacher.”

Oh, please. That sounded like something out of one of those romance novels with a shirtless man on the cover. Then a terrible possibility hit me. “Was he one of your students?”

I knew that a first year teacher was not that much older than her students, but there were still professional and ethical boundaries.

“A student? Of course not,” Ms. LeBon said huffily. Then, I swear her face got dreamy. “He was my principal.”

Okay, so that still presented all kinds of problems – power imbalance, all of that.

Ms. LeBon was staring into space. “You had an affair with your principal?” I asked.

“I did,” she said with a hint of defiance. “I found him irresistible. I admired his knowledge, his charisma, his confidence. I was overwhelmed that out of all the women he could have pursued, he chose me. In those days, I was less – myself,” she said.

I translated that to mean she was less flamboyant.

“Did you marry him?” I asked. I realized that I knew absolutely nothing about her early life. Why would I? It wasn’t like she told stories about the early years of her teaching career.

“One cannot marry a married man,” she said, her eyes tearing up again. “He said that he was miserable with his wife and would leave her when the time was right.

Okay, so I had a rather unsuccessful history with men, but even I recognized a line like that.

“But the time was never right?” I asked, trying to be diplomatic.

“I became pregnant with his child,” she said. “I was positive that would cause him to chart his course with me, and not stay with a woman who didn’t understand or appreciate him.”

Wow. More of the same crap. “But he didn’t?” I said.

“He said it would damage his professional reputation if word got out that he was having a child with one of his teachers,” she said sadly.

“And what was it supposed to do to your reputation?” I asked, anger welling up in me for the young, naïve girl she must have been.

“It would have ruined me,” Ms. LeBon said. “This is a small town, and times were not nearly as liberal as they are now.”

Fee was clearly taken up with the story as well. “So what did you do?”

“What choice did I have? He said that if I told anybody, even one person, he would see that I was fired. My career would have been over.”

“Nice guy,” I said sarcastically. I felt like giving a “whee” like Henry.

“He convinced me that the only way out of this was to give the baby up for adoption. He had a good friend who was a lawyer, and they arranged everything. He

assured me that it would be a private adoption, and that my identity as the mother would never be revealed.”

“Or his identity as the father,” I snarked.

“How did you hide the fact that you were pregnant?” Fee asked. “Did you take a leave?”

“I couldn’t afford that,” Ms. LeBon said. “I started dressing in lots of loose, brightly colored layers. They distracted the eye from what was underneath.”

I stared at her in amazement. “And you kept on dressing like that all these years?”

“I thought it would look suspicious if I dressed like that for a short while and then went back to my previous drab skirts and sweaters,” she said. “Besides, it became my trademark.”

Birthmarks, trademarks – what was going on with all of this?

“So you had the baby and gave it up for adoption?” Fee asked softly.

“I did. I had the baby at a private hospital in New York that the lawyer arranged. It was terrible never to hold her, never to even see her, but I felt like it was the best life I could offer her. I had no way to support myself, let alone a child, without my teaching job, and I would lose that if I didn’t give up the baby.”

I noticed her words – “the baby” rather than “my baby.”

“It was a girl?” Fee asked.

“I heard a nurse say that,” Ms. LeBon said. “Then the baby was gone, whisked away to what I was promised was a loving couple who couldn’t have a child of their own and were overjoyed to welcome this one.”

“And then you started a new school year and went on with your life,” I said.

“I did,” Ms. LeBon said, glaring at me although my words had been not meant judgmentally. “What choice did I have?”

“What about your principal?” Fee asked.

“He took a different job out in Oregon,” Ms. LeBon said. “He and his wife moved away that summer.”

“Do you know what happened to him?” Miss Henflinger asked.

“No,” Ms. LeBon said. “I closed the door on that chapter of my life, and vowed to never talk about it as long as I lived.”

Wow. And people say that men are good at compartmentalizing. Still, I understood. What good would it do her to dwell on events in her life that she had felt unable to control and that she couldn't change?

“Did you ever wonder about your daughter?” Fee asked.

“Of course I did,” Ms. LeBon said in the gentlest voice I had ever heard her use. “I wished her happiness. I looked at children and then adults who would be about her age and wondered what she looked like, what her interests were. I wished her a life where she never knew what a fool her birth mother had been.”

I was surprised to find that tears were falling down my face, and I swiped them away. Then I looked around the table and realized I had plenty of company.

Chapter Thirteen

Pieces were clicking into place. Lewis Flynn, the man Fee had thought was her father, was not biologically related. Was it possible that the couple to whom the lawyer had given Ms. LeBon's baby had been Lewis Flynn and his wife, Ruth?

Perhaps that explained the closeness between Fee and Ms. LeBon – on some unrealized level, they had felt a connection that went beyond teacher and student. Did I believe in that? Was it possible?

"Ms. LeBon," I said, "when you first met Fee when she was a senior in high school, did you have any sense that she might be your daughter?"

Ms. LeBon looked at me, and I could tell that she wanted to attack me, but then she looked at Fee. "I was taken with her intelligence and her resilience. Although I didn't know what her living circumstances were, I could see that there was a layer of unhappiness in her."

Suddenly she wheeled to look at Fee, and tears began streaming down her face. "I could have been meeting my daughter that day you walked in my French class. How could I not know that?"

“The same way I didn’t know it,” Fee said, her voice gentle. “Let’s look at this. It is unbelievable enough that we may be related. It would have been totally unrealistic for us to have looked at each other in a French classroom in Fool’s Hill High School and had a sudden knowledge that we were mother and daughter. Besides, that possibility would never have entered my mind. I didn’t even have the slightest suspicion that I might have been adopted.”

Mr. Barnes dabbed at what might have been tears. “Cecille, even though teachers are not supposed to have favorites, we all know perfectly well that occasionally there are students with whom we simply connect. They become special to us.”

Ms. LeBon turned to me. “Like you and your Elijah Wu.”

“He’s not my Elijah Wu,” I said quickly, but then I paused. “He is special to me. I believe in his genius, and I enjoy encouraging him.”

“But that doesn’t mean that you suspected you were his mother,” Ms. LeBon insisted.

I managed not to laugh, but it was hard. “I know with one hundred percent certainty that I am not Elijah Wu’s mother. I would have had to give birth to him when I was about sixteen, and I didn’t have a baby then or ever.” Then I realized how harsh my words might sound. “Not that I wouldn’t be proud to be his mother.”

Mr. Barnes tried to help. “And Allison Green was one of the special ones for me. She gives me credit for inspiring her love for history, which eventually led her to law school.”

I waited for Miss Henflinger to chime in with the name of one of her special students, but she remained silent.

No, I didn't think that I would be the one. It would have to have been a student who had much more aptitude for math than I did.

Actually, forget aptitude. It would have to be someone who didn't loathe math with a deep and abiding passion.

Then again, Ricky was special to Leah, and he was a hellion.

Focus, Rue.

There were critically important things going on at Miss Henflinger's kitchen table, and I needed to pay attention. Fee might have just found her mother.

"There are other possibilities," Miss Henflinger said, bringing her incisive intelligence to bear on the topic. "It is possible that there is a less direct connection between the two of you. You might be distant relatives of some nature, not mother and daughter."

I looked from Fee to Ms. LeBon, trying to see how they reacted to this possibility. Relief? Disappointment?

I pulled out my phone. "There's one way to find out," I said decisively. I looked in my recent calls and redialed one of the numbers.

"Who are you calling?" Ms. LeBon demanded.

I ignored her, getting up and pacing to the other side of Miss Henflinger's kitchen. "This is Rue Callison," I said in my best official voice. "I recently had DNA testing done at your lab." I paused to listen. "Yes, I heard the results, and I appreciate how quickly you provided them. I now need to have another test done

and interfaced with the results of the tests you did for Rue Callison, Ray Callison, Fiona Callison, and the skeleton.” I held the phone back a bit as I got a torrent of complaints. “Yes, I understand that the tests were expedited only because Detective Haverton of the Kent County Police ordered that. If I need to have him contact you again, I will do so. Just be warned that he is a very busy man, and he will be annoyed.” I didn’t mention how much he sighed when he was annoyed.

Okay, so I was on thin ice with the truth. I seriously doubted that Detective Haverton would see getting Ms. LeBon’s DNA tested as a police issue, and I had just thrown in the skeleton’s DNA to make it sound like at least peripherally related to his case. Besides, we might as well cover all of the bases. Maybe I should try to tack on a test for Isabel Louise while we were at it.

“Thank you,” I said when Detective Haverton’s name worked its magic. “We will be there within the hour.”

“What if I don’t want to do this right now?” Ms. LeBon asked. “Maybe Fee and I need to have time to process this.”

“You don’t know what to process yet,” I said. “You need certainty.”

“That’s my choice, not yours,” Ms. LeBon snapped.

“What about Fee?” I asked her. “Don’t you think she deserves to know?”

“Since when do you speak for Fee?”

How was this turning into an attack on me? I was simply trying to gather crucial information.

“Fee?” I asked.

I almost felt sorry for Fee. She looked from Ms. LeBon to me and back again. "I would truly appreciate it if you would have the test done."

Good choice, Fee.

"Who's going?" I asked. "The lab is in Dover, so we need to get started." I looked around the table. "Miss Henflinger, Mr. Barnes, you don't have to come if it's uncomfortable for you."

"Cecille and I can go," Fee said.

"I'm going." That was non-negotiable for me. "I made the arrangements with the lab, and I need to be there in case there are any issues." Actually, I needed to be there to be certain that Ms. LeBon didn't bail on the DNA test. As far as I was concerned, I'd carry her into the lab if I had to. That's how badly I wanted clarity on this whole family thing.

"It will be fine, no matter what," Fee said reassuringly to Ms. LeBon. "You're already my best friend. If there's more to it, that will just be a bonus."

I was astounded. There must not be a genetic component for graciousness because I sure didn't have what she had just demonstrated.

Miss Henflinger looked at Mr. Barnes. "Martin will drive," she said, and he nodded his approval.

"I'll take my Prius and follow you," I said quickly. There was no way I was going to cram myself into the back seat of a small sedan with Fee and Ms. LeBon. Besides, it would be good for me to try to get my thoughts into some kind of coherent order.

Fee and Miss Henflinger went off to find something for Fee to wear that was not soaked in sweet tea. Fee, to her credit, was smiling when she came back wearing a white blouse with a little round collar edged with lace, paired with navy blue pants that looked at risk of falling off of her.

I took their absence as a chance to pull Mr. Barnes aside. "Please don't let Ms. LeBon escape. Please don't let her refuse to have this test done."

"I think Lillian and I can keep her corralled," he said. "I understand the urgency."

"Thank you," I said. "I'll be right behind you if she gets loose."

I was only partly joking.

I gave him the address of the lab, and I went outside to wait for them to pull away.

I could no longer push aside the reality that I had not allowed to fully sink in.

There was a possibility that Ms. LeBon was my grandmother.

That seemed wrong to me on so many levels.

First of all, she didn't like me. She snapped at me and criticized me and often thought the worst of me. I was her first choice as a target when something went wrong.

Second of all, we were very different human beings. She was flamboyant and dramatic with her dyed red hair and extravagant style. I was all about comfort; it would be hard to find someone with less of a sense of fashion or concern about appearance. When I was teaching, I looked professional and show my students that I

had respect for my job and for them, but otherwise, I was a jeans and tee shirt and sneakers and ponytail kind of person.

Then there was her way of dealing with men. I had seen her antagonize Maria Theresa over a man just for her own amusement. I'd seen her go through a wild infatuation with Archibald Zooper. I had also seen her go after Uncle Goose.

I couldn't even think about the ramifications of that. If Ms. LeBon was my grandmother, was she related to Uncle Goose?

Wait. She couldn't be. It wasn't like my father was related to her through anything but marriage, so Uncle Goose was even more removed.

Then there was the issue of her name. She had been a teacher at Fool's Hill High School, which I had attended years before I became a teacher there. I had taken Spanish rather than French, so she had never been my teacher, but I still could never bring myself to use her first name.

Miss Henflinger.

Mr. Barnes.

Ms. LeBon.

If I hadn't been able to call her Cecille, what was I supposed to call her if she ended up being my grandmother? I tried out some possibilities.

Granny?

No, she would be horrified by that.

Nana? No, that sounded more home-baked cookies than Ms. LeBon would ever be.

Meemaw?

That was too southern for me. Besides, it always reminded me of a donkey braying.

Didn't Goldie Hawn's grandchildren call her Glamma?

I couldn't take that name seriously even though Ms. LeBon would probably like it.

Maybe I should take a page out of Leah's book. She called my father C-Dad, short for Callison Dad. Maybe I could call Ms. LeBon L-Mom. Wait. I was a generation off. L-G-Mom?

I pounded the steering wheel in frustration. Nothing about this felt right.

Maybe life would be simpler if Ms. LeBon bailed out of the car at the next red light and refused to have the DNA test done.

Maybe I'd just keep on driving.

Chapter Fourteen

I got Ms. LeBon checked in at the lab. Fortunately, there was not enough seating for us to stay together, and Mr. Barnes and I ended up off by ourselves. He had pulled up his phone and accessed the lab's Wifi. His fingers were flying as he pulled up screen after screen.

"How was the drive?" I asked cautiously.

"Interesting," Mr. Barnes said. His tone gave me no clue about how he was using that multi-purpose word.

"Are you researching something about Ms. LeBon or Fee?" I didn't want to be rude if he was simply paying his bills or answering his email.

"It took a substantial amount of effort, but Lillian finally convinced Cecille to give us the name of her baby's father."

I thought of the dastardly principal who had seduced, threatened, and abandoned a young girl. "What's his name?" I snarled.

"Grantham Lakewood," Mr. Barnes said, not looking up from his phone's screen.

Well. That was a dignified name for an immoral jerk. I was suddenly interested in what Mr. Barnes was finding. Maybe I needed to track him down and tell him what I thought of him.

Wait. He was a principal when Ms. LeBon was a first year teacher, so he must have been quite a bit older than her. That meant the odds were good that he was dead.

My head was spinning.

“Grantham Lakewood,” Mr. Barnes murmured. “There you are.” He looked up at me. “He died at the age of 89.”

Fine. So I didn’t need to take a road trip to tell Grandpa Grantham what a lowlife he was.

“His obituary lists all kinds of education awards he won – principal of the year, superintendent of the year – as well as a devoted volunteer at a local food bank in Oregon.”

“Does it say anything about a wife?” I asked.

“She died a year before he did. They’d been married for more than sixty years.”

“I guess that means he stopped impregnating young teachers,” I said. “Or else he was really good at getting away with it.” I thought for a moment. “What was her name?”

“Brenda,” Mr. Barnes replied.

Brenda and Grantham Lakewood, possibly my grandparents.

“Any children?”

“No,” Mr. Barnes said. Then he paused. “At least none that are listed in the obituary.

Right. I guessed an illegitimate daughter placed for adoption didn’t make the local paper.

I looked at Mr. Barnes, studying his serious, kind face. “What do you think about all of this?”

He thought before he answered. “I know it seems unbelievable that Cecille and Fee could have crossed paths, but I’ve learned that we live in a nearly inexplicable world.”

“Did you have any idea that Ms. LeBon had this secret past?” I asked.

Again he pondered. “I always thought that she was a woman who harbored secrets. When I heard that she had been in touch with your mother all of those years, I thought that was what had given her that air of mystery.” He paused. “No, mystery is not quite right. There has been a note of smugness about her, a sense of ‘I know something that you don’t.’”

“But you never suspected that she had been pregnant? There were no rumors?”

“I wouldn’t have known any of that. I started teaching a few years after Cecille and Lillian, and I didn’t grow up here, just visited my grandparents in the summer. Besides, I was more likely to have my head buried in a book than to have been in the information loop.”

“How did you end up as part of the Brain Trust, then?” I asked.

“When I retired from teaching, I found that I missed the stimulation of conversation with my colleagues and my students. Lillian and Cecille had retired a few years earlier, and they invited me to join them for lunch at the front table of the Stoplight Diner to give me a retirement present. That present was a plant that I promptly killed, but the real gift was the chance to converse on a regular basis with intelligent, opinionated women. I would say it has been an education that surpasses any I received in college.”

I could only imagine what Mr. Barnes had learned.

“Why does Ms. LeBon hate me?” I asked. I hadn’t really planned to ask him such a prying question, but there it was, hanging in the air between us.

“I don’t believe she hates you, Rue.”

“Okay, dislikes me. Is annoyed by me. Never gives me the benefit of the doubt.”

“That is just a side of her personality,” Mr. Barnes said diplomatically.

“Why does she save it for me?” I asked, trying to keep the whine out of my voice.

“Rue, I think she feels threatened by you.”

“What? Threatened by me? What could she possibly find threatening about me?”

“Let’s see,” Mr. Barnes said quietly. “You’re a younger woman. You are a highly respected teacher whereas students tended to have a few doubts about Cecille’s knowledge of her subject matter.”

You mean I wasn't the only one who thought Ms. LeBon's knowledge of French was suspect?

"You have the adoration of two men Cecille holds in high esteem, Ray and Gus Callison," Mr. Barnes continued. "Plus she knows how much Lillian Henflinger cares about you."

"Miss Henflinger? Me? She still looks at me like I'm that inept math student she taught in high school."

"That's where you're wrong," Mr. Barnes said firmly. "Have you noticed that every time you end up in trouble, she's the first one to jump in to help you? What about the fact that she worries about that cat of yours as much as you do?"

"That's about Caterina, not me," I protested.

"It's about knowing how devastated you would be if anything happened to Caterina," Mr. Barnes said firmly.

I wanted to believe what Mr. Barnes was saying, but I would always believe that Miss Henflinger liked Caterina far better than she liked me.

"Lillian isn't much for telling people she cares about them," Mr. Barnes continued. "I don't think she had that kind of upbringing, and she spent her teaching career convincing her students that she was a hard-nosed curmudgeon, even though she dedicated all of her waking hours to figuring out how to make them understand math. There weren't many female math teachers when she began her career, and I think she always felt the need to prove herself. "

I think we knew that we were being taught by a Fool's Hill institution; after all, the tradition of flinging rubber chickens on stage at graduation came about because of respect and gratitude for her, odd as that sounds.

It would take me a while to believe that she had kind thoughts for me, but it was a thought that would make me happy to consider.

Ms. LeBon came out of the back lab area, followed by the same woman who had met with my father, Fee and me. "Do you anticipate any more people to be added to this testing pool?" she asked.

"I don't anticipate it at this point, but you just never know, do you?" I said.

"I am not certain that most families operate like this," she said, "but I appreciate that genetics can become complicated." She looked at Mr. Barnes and Miss Henflinger. "Are you certain that they don't need to be DNA tested?"

"Certainly not," Miss Henflinger said.

What? She didn't want to join the family?

Chapter Fifteen

I went back to the diner to fill in my father on what he had missed, which left him speechless for several minutes. For once, I didn't fill the silence. After all, I had taken the drive to and from Dover to try to sort out my thoughts and had basically ended up pounding the steering wheel in confusion.

Fee came in, insisting that she wanted to help out to make up for skipping out earlier, and the other waitresses seemed happy to see her. "Is Ms. LeBon here?" I asked, fearing her answer.

"No. She was exhausted and asked to be taken home," Fee said.

"I'll give you a ride to her house when the diner closes," my father said.

"Ray, I don't have any right to ask you this, but I think I need to get a car. I haven't driven in many years, but I would enjoy the independence of not needing to rely on Cecille and the kindness of people like you to get where I need to go. Is there any chance you would be willing to take me shopping for a used car?"

I stared at her suspiciously, but I understood her point. I wasn't one of those people who actually liked to drive and did it for relaxation or entertainment. I didn't think I was a particularly adept driver, and my wretched sense of direction guaranteed that if my GPS ever malfunctioned, I'd be lost indefinitely. In fact, I

considered it fortunate that I had not become one of those news stories about someone who blindly follows the GPS into a river or a lake or some other hard-to-miss body of water. However, I put a high value on the independence that having a car at my disposal gave me.

“I can do that,” my father said. “Let me make some calls first.”

With my father’s legendary network of friends, he’d probably have the best deals lined up for her in five minutes.

“Thank you,” Fee said. She didn’t look like a woman who was waiting for the result of a DNA test to find out if somebody she’d known as a teacher and friend was actually her mother. Of course, how exactly was that supposed to look? These circumstances weren’t so common that there was a stock expression.

I was getting ready to leave, eager to go home and bury myself in the soft fur of my cat, when Isabel Louise and Elijah Wu came down the stairs and headed for the back door, carrying his drone. When I waved to them, they immediately navigated to where I was sitting.

“I was just going to text you,” Elijah Wu said. “I wanted to ask you if we could go out to your pond to do some research on the pontoon system.”

“Of course,” I said. I was used to Elijah Wu using the top of my tower and the area near the pond for drone takeoffs and landings.

“I’m telling you that you need a larger surface area,” Isabel Louise said, totally ignoring me.

“But think about a dragonfly,” Elijah Wu said. “Maybe the best answer is to keep it really light and aerodynamic.”

“Did you know that scientists have found fossils of dragonflies from 300 million years ago that had wingspans of up to two feet?” Isabel Louise said.

How did she know that? Was she even right, or was she just making it up?

Knowing Isabel Louise, I was certain that her information was correct. She was not a whimsical girl who would invent a huge fossil dragonfly.

“Did you know that they catch their prey with their feet, rip off the wings, and then eat it on the fly?” Elijah Wu said casually.

It was on between these two. For them, this passed as casual conversation.

“Did you know that in the nymph stage, they can expel water through an anal opening? It’s like they have a jet propulsion system,” Isabel Louise said.

What was amazing was that I was convinced that the word “dragonfly” had just been casually mentioned. It wasn’t like they had texted each other and said, “Let’s discuss dragonflies. Do your research.” They both had the ability to make me think not only “how do they know that” but also “why do they know that?” I suspected that they both had photographic memories to go along with their eclectic interests.

“Did you know that dragonflies have four wings, and each can operate independently? That’s why they are such incredible fliers and can hover,” Elijah Wu said calmly. “Scientists and engineers have studied them for decades trying to learn how to build a more efficient flying machine.

This was all fascinating, but I had a feeling it could go on indefinitely. I stood up. “There are almost always dragonflies at the pond,” I said. “Let’s go.” I felt a bit defensive. When I saw a dragonfly, all I thought was, “How beautiful.”

“I can also take some aerial video to find possibilities for Leah’s photographs,”
Elijah Wu assured me.

“What photographs?” Isabel Louise asked, and off they went.

Their conversation in the car would probably be tidbits of information about the history of photography or how to best edit a single image from a video or the best altitude for an aerial view.

I was glad I had my own car.

“Fee, I get it,” I thought.

Before I could get to my Prius, a text came in.

It was from Ike: “Jake is ready to try his girl version of Steps for Success. Any chance the test girl is available today around 4:00?”

I drove home and saw that Isabel Louise and Elijah Wu were already out by the pond. I had spent the drive pondering how to convince Isabel Louise to be the test girl. I knew that the secret weapon was Elijah Wu, but I couldn’t figure out to utilize him. It wasn’t like he was a big dancer himself and would want to take her out dancing. I feared that she would consider going to a social event that involved dancing as a form of torture. I kept telling myself that I was an adult who should be able to outsmart her, but this was Isabel Louise. I would have to be a combination of Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Michelle Obama to win with her.

I decided on a straightforward approach. “Isabel Louise, I need you to do a favor for me.”

“Why?”

“Why?” I retorted. “Because there is something that you can do that I cannot.”

“That covers a lot of territory,” the girl said.

Clearly, this was not going to be easy.

“Is it something I could do for you?” Elijah Wu asked, shooting a dark look at Isabel Louise. “You know I would do anything I could to help you.”

I almost laughed out loud at the image that popped into my head – Elijah Wu dressed in drag pretending to be a middle-school-aged girl to test out Jake’s plan. “I appreciate your kindness, Elijah Wu,” I said, “but I’m afraid I need Isabel Louise for this.”

I stared at the girl, waiting for her to capitulate; of course, she didn’t. “Aren’t you going to ask what the favor is?” I asked.

For a bright person, she had remarkably little curiosity. After all, come to think of it, she hadn’t even asked me what I had found out about the birthmark that matched her own. I figured I’d wait until I had solid information – facts – before I filled her in on her possible newly-revealed relatives.

“Fine,” Isabel Louise sighed. “What is this favor?”

“Why do you have such a negative attitude toward doing a favor?” I asked the surly girl.

“Think about it,” she replied quickly. “If people ask you to do them a favor, is it ever anything pleasant? ‘Hey, do me a favor and accept this extra money I’d really like to get rid of?’ Never heard that one. ‘Do me a favor and finish this container of ice cream?’ Don’t think so. A favor is intrinsically something you won’t want to do. That’s why it’s a favor.”

Crap. She had me there. I decided on a different approach.

“What’s the worst thing I could ask you to do as a favor?” I asked. Maybe being a test student for a dance class would look good in comparison.

“Pretend to be stupid to feed a male ego,” she answered.

“No acting stupid required,” I said. After all, the reason I wanted her as a trial student was because I knew she’d be tough on Jake, preparing him for the reality of a flock of younger girls.

“Making me live with my aunt again,” Isabel Louise continued.

“Hey, I’m the one who helped you move in with Miss Henflinger instead of Ms. LeBon,” I reminded her.

That did not seem to win me any good will.

Isabel Louise’s face scrunched up into an expression of utter distaste. “Make me go back to high school.”

Okay, so despite my best efforts, Fool’s Hill High School had not been a good fit for Isabel Louise. She had hated it, and it had hated her right back. There would have been a major uprising against her if Mya Hernandez had not graciously agreed to accept her as co-valedictorian despite having been an asset to the school for four years as opposed to Isabel Louise’s month or two of disruption.

“Isabel Louise,” I said, “I want you to be at the new dance studio on Main Street at 4:00. A friend of mine needs to test out a class he’s designing for late elementary and middle school girls, and you are the perfect person to tell him what he’s doing right and what he’s doing wrong.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” she snapped, turning to stare at Elijah Wu in amazement. “This is a joke, right?”

I looked at him and shook my head.

“I think she actually wants your help, and you need to do it,” Elijah Wu said firmly. “Remember that we’ll never be able to test a pontoon design without the use of her pond, and she has given me a job and a place to live. If I can’t help her with this, then I want you to.”

Elijah Wu was coming through for me big time.

“I can tell this friend of yours what he’s doing wrong?” Isabel Louise asked.

Poor Jake. “Absolutely.”

“And I’ll be the only student?”

“For this test run, yes. I’ll be there to grade him.”

“To grade him, not me?”

“Only him,” I assured her. “And I’ll take you and Elijah Wu to dinner afterwards at Cracker Barrel.”

“Deal,” Elijah Wu said with a smile. “Not that I don’t love the food at the diner, Ms. Callison, but I could go for some of their batter-dipped fried fish.”

“No offense taken, Elijah Wu,” I said. “As much as I love the French fries at the diner, a Cracker Barrel baked potato sounds good about now.”

“What if I really don’t want to dance?” Isabel Louise asked.

“Then it’s his job to get you to do it despite your resistance,” I answered, knowing that, thanks to Elijah Wu, I had won.

“So maybe I could pretend to be a really bad dancer,” Isabel Louise said, narrowing her eyes.

Oh, the steps we take to protect our fragile egos. Why did I think that she would not need to pretend to be a bad dancer?

“I’m a terrible dancer,” I assured her. “If this didn’t require a younger presence, I’d be happy to muddle through myself. You’ll be great in comparison.”

That actually wasn’t false modesty.

“I suppose I’ll have to do it,” she grouched. “But in return, Elijah Wu and I get to use your pond for test landings whenever we want. My pontoon hydraulic system is going to be amazing.”

“Deal,” I said. They already could use the pond whenever they wanted, so this was a no-cost victory for me.

Except for the cost of dinner at Cracker Barrel, of course, but I could handle that.

“I’ll have her there at 4:00,” Elijah Wu said. “Text me if you need anything at the diner before that.”

“Thanks,” I said, “to both of you.”

“You’re welcome,” Elijah Wu said. Isabel Louise ignored me, already starting to talk about air-driven pistons and surface tension.

I stared out over the pond.

A dragonfly hovered in front of me. I hoped that Jake didn’t feel like dragonfly prey after Isabel Louise was done with him.

Chapter Sixteen

Jake was pacing around anxiously when I got to Maria Theresa's School of Dance and Tango Parlor. "Where are the others?" I asked.

"Mary Terry hired Forrest to handle the finances, so she and Ike are meeting with him."

"I need to warn you about your test student," I said, suddenly having an attack of conscience. "She's . . ."

But I was too late. Elijah Wu escorted Isabel Louise in the door.

I have to admit that I was surprised with Isabel Louise's demeanor. I had expected a scowl of disapproval; after all, this was a wasted hour when she could have been suing Swarthmore College or trying to one-up Elijah Wu. Instead, the expression on her face was even more worrisome. She looked like a lion waiting to spring at an unsuspecting antelope.

"You need to leave," she said to Elijah Wu. He, no surprise, seemed more than willing to dash out the door. "One hour," I called out to his departing back. He gave

me a wave of acknowledgement. "Going to your uncle's hardware store," he called out, and then he was gone.

Jake pulled a chair into the dance studio, and I took a seat, my clipboard in hand.

I don't know what it is about clipboards, but they are kind of magical. When I carry one in my classroom, my students automatically behave better. I guess it looks like a symbol of authority, or perhaps it's the knowledge that I wouldn't even have to go to my desk to write them up; I can do it while I keep right on walking around. In actuality, my clipboard is more likely to hold nothing beyond a copy of the roster, but that's my little teacher secret. Just to keep them on their toes, I occasionally give one of them a serious look and make a notation. Works every time.

"Good afternoon," Jake said to Isabel Louise.

"What's good about it?" Isabel Louise asked.

And they were off.

"It's a good time for Steps for Success," he said with a wavering smile.

"That's cheesy," the girl retorted.

"Do you have a suggestion for a better name?" Jake asked, his voice genuine and concerned.

"Deranged Dance for Demonic Demagogues," Isabel Louise suggested.

Jake threw a desperate glance at me, but I immediately lowered my eyes to my clipboard and made a notation. He was on his own here.

"I will take that under consideration," Jake said. He took a deep breath and gathered himself. "Feeling at ease in social situations is a priceless gift," he began.

“Why?” Isabel Louise demanded.

“Why?” Jake asked, clearly taken aback. “Why is it a gift to feel at ease in social situations?”

“A priceless gift,” Isabel Louise repeated, her voice even but with an edge to it.

“It can lessen anxiety,” Jake said. “It can allow you to make a good first impression on potential acquaintances.”

Not bad, I thought.

Isabel Louise clearly did not agree. “Don’t you think that a better way to make a good first impression is to say something intelligent?”

Jake was in a no-win situation. If he said yes, then the entire premise of this class was destroyed. If he said no, then he was claiming that intelligence didn’t matter. I could see Isabel Louise meeting a person for the first time and saying, “Did you know that dragonflies rip off the wings of their prey and eat them in mid-air? Pass the potatoes, please.”

“Let’s do a warm-up exercise,” Jake said. He was beginning to pace back and forth, so this seemed like a good move. “Follow along with me. This is called Shakedown.” He proceeded to wave his right hand in the air five times, followed by his left hand, right foot, left foot, and entire body, counting out loud for each sequence. Then he reduced the repetitions to four, three, two, and finally one.

“You look foolish, and you’re asking me to look foolish,” Isabel Louise proclaimed after joining in with a total lack of commitment and enthusiasm.

I could see a bit of red beginning to color Jake’s ears. “There are worse things than looking foolish.”

Isabel Louise furrowed her brow and pondered that. "Really? Like what?"

"Being rude," Jake said sharply.

Well. That was a gutsy move that could go one of two ways: either his student would back down and cooperate, or she would refuse to do anything further.

Isabel Louise looked at me, and I simply met her eyes, giving her no clue as to what I expected or wanted.

"What's next?" she finally asked Jake.

"We need to embrace the beat of a piece of music," Jake said. "We need to feel it so that we can move in harmony with it. I am going to put on a piece of music, and we are going to march in place to it."

I made a few notes. Interesting choice.

The next thing I knew, "Stars and Stripes Forever" by John Philip Sousa was blasting out of the sound system. Jake promptly began to march forcefully in place, like a one-man stationary marching band. After staring at him in amazement, Isabel Louise joined in. "Give it all you've got. Imagine you're stomping on people you don't like," Jake suddenly yelled.

He began to march around the studio. I could feel the vibrations from his thudding footfalls in the floor. I desperately began to write notes about not encouraging hostility and aggression in young people, but when I looked up, Isabel Louise was stomping and marching and following Jake like he was her own personal drum major.

I was pretty certain that Isabel Louise was imagining that I was squarely under her feet with some of her steps.

I made a note that perhaps a more contemporary piece of music might be better, but then I crossed it out. If Jake had picked a popular song, the students might be distracted by identifying who was singing it and whether or not they liked that singer. This way the focus was simply on the regular, regimented beat. By the time the song ended, it was all I could do not to join in.

“Excellent,” Jake said to Isabel Louise. “You did an excellent job of moving exactly on the beat.”

You used praise and made it specific. Good job, I wrote.

Isabel Louise was not that easily won over that she succumbed to Jake’s charms, but at least she didn’t snap back at him. Baby steps.

“Now we’re going to try a patterned dance,” Jake said. “All you have to do is repeat after me.” He stopped to look at his student. “Please reserve your judgment that this is foolish. Trust that it’s leading somewhere.”

“It is my right to pass judgment,” Isabel Louise said.

“And you can do it all you want in the privacy of your head. Please do not voice it,” Jake said firmly. “Trust me.”

“I do not trust utter strangers,” Isabel Louise said.

“That is a good policy,” Jake said, his ears turning red again. “However, you are safe here. Rue is sitting right over there, and I am positive that she will intervene if I ask you to do anything dangerous or offensive.”

“I don’t know about that,” Isabel Louise muttered, but she was watching Jake.

“One, two, ready, go,” Jake said, and then he held out his right hand, palm down, followed by his left hand, palm down, followed by his right hand, palm up, followed by his left hand, palm up.

I kept my groan inside my head. Even I, non-dancer that I was, knew the opening moves to “The Macarena.” Then I perked up. The vision of Isabel Louise doing that dance fad from the ‘90’s could be highly entertaining.

Sure enough, the next moves were to put hands to opposite shoulders and then to the sides of the head, then to the waist, then to the hips. “Now we are going to put the moves together, and we’re going to march as we do them,” Jake said.

Nice way to tie in the marching, which I had thought was nothing more than a warm-up activity. After several repetitions, Isabel Louise had it mastered.

Of course she did. As Miss Henflinger would have insisted, it was mathematical.

“Now we’re going to add music,” Jake said, running over to the sound system. This time when he led the movements, he added some hip action. I was gobsmacked to see Isabel Louise trying to imitate him. She wasn’t good at any kind of swiveling, but she was trying. I was also startled to hear that there was a new version of the song, much more contemporary-sounding than the original. There was nobody more dance-averse than I was, except maybe Isabel Louise, and I found myself thinking that I would be trying this tonight in the privacy of my own room.

“You have talent,” Jake proclaimed.

Isabel Louise returned to form. “It doesn’t take talent to perform repetitive drivel.”

I was interested to see how Jake would take this setback. I feared that he had thought that victory was his after convincing Isabel Louise to dance, but it was rarely that easy. With many students, it might be two steps forward, one step back. With Isabel Louise, it was two steps forward, three steps back, and a pivot in an unexpected direction.

I saw Jake tense up. "That repetitive drivel is likely to be played at any wedding reception you might go to. Now you can feel confident joining in."

"The wedding reception of eighty-year-olds," Isabel retorted.

"I went to a wedding reception of twenty-three-year-olds last year, and they did 'The Macarena,'" Jake snapped back.

"You must have been hallucinating."

"I was not hallucinating. I'd only had one beer."

No, Jake. No, no, no. Getting into a back and forth struggle was not going to get you anywhere. She was simply distracting you from the next part of your lesson.

For the rest of the hour, the power shifted back and forth. It was fascinating to watch. There were times when I thought Isabel Louise was going to win. As near as I could tell, her definition of victory was making Jake leave, curse, or cry. He didn't do any of the three, although I bet his blood pressure was a hundred points above its normal state. I could see him come within one more snarky comment of losing his temper, but somehow, miraculously, he held on.

On Jake's part, he scored some minor victories. Isabel Louise, after all of her negativity, basically did what he asked of her. She held her arms out in the position she would assume if she were dancing with a partner, and she learned a basic box

step. She wasn't putting any effort into being graceful, but she moved her feet. For Jake's closing activity, a free dance to Taylor Swift's "Shake It Off," Isabel Louise swayed. Spirit? Humor? Absolutely none. I noted, however, that she swayed in time to the music.

Jake made it to the end of the hour, thanked Isabel Louise for her participation, and sank onto the floor the moment after she walked out the door, now with a bounce in her step, to meet Elijah Wu.

"You survived," I said to Jake. I actually was quite proud of him.

"Do you give a grade lower than F?" Jake asked. "F minus?"

"Actually," I said, "you got a C."

"Really? I passed?"

"You did," I said. "There are some things you need to change, but you actually had a solid lesson plan with a nice variety of activities."

"What about the fact that I wanted to slap her smug face every other minute?"

"You didn't, which is what counts. I promise you that a flock of younger girls will be easier to teach than one Isabel Louise."

"Promise?"

I promise," I said, getting up. "Let's talk tomorrow about my suggestions. Right now I have to take Isabel Louise and Elijah Wu out to dinner. Want to join us?"

"You would have to pay me a lot of money to spend one more minute in that girl's presence," Jake said. "I'd rather starve. I'd rather stick pins in my eyeballs."

I tried to be a noble person, but I couldn't. "You know, I taught her English last year in a class with thirty other kids."

“You’re either a saint or an idiot,” Jake said.

Was it possible to be both? I decided it was.

I waved to Jake as I took my clipboard and headed for the door.

When I looked back to say goodbye, he was curled up on the floor in a fetal position.

“Isabel Louise is the spawn of Satan,” I heard him mumble as I left.

Chapter Seventeen

When I asked Isabel Louise over dinner what she had gained by being so difficult with Jake, she looked at me in surprise. “Difficult? I thought I was being cooperative. Pleasant, even.”

I listened for sarcasm in her voice, but I couldn’t detect it. If that was what Isabel Louise thought cooperative and pleasant behavior looked like, the world was in a lot of trouble.

Of course, I had already known that.

Dinner was a blur of conversations in which I couldn’t have participated even if I had wanted to, which I didn’t. My only role was to pay the bill. To give him credit, Elijah Wu occasionally tried to explain topics like fractals and isotonic contractions, but I waved him off and focused on my baked potato. It had butter, extra sour cream, green onions, and cheese on it, and it was delectable. With a side of cole slaw, it was almost worth the conversation. Pleading a need to visit the ladies’ room, I wandered around the store part of Cracker Barrel, assuring myself that I didn’t need a stuffed talking parrot although I did succumb to the retro pleasure of a roll of Necco Wafers.

When I finally went back to the table, neither of them had even realized I was gone.

I thought that Jake's trial dance class and dinner with Elijah Wu and Isabel Louise had served a greater purpose: distracting me from thinking about the DNA results that were looming. All I wanted to do was not waste time thinking about something that might not come to pass.

I actually was doing fine until I curled up in bed. Caterina was purring beside me, and I stroked her beautiful gray fur and thought I would be able to fall asleep.

My brain had other ideas. It started out slowly and then got more and more agitated. What if I had spent my entire life living in a town with my grandmother without knowing her identity? What had I lost?

Or had I actually gained something? Somehow I couldn't imagine sharing Christmas dinners and birthday parties with a woman who didn't even like me.

But maybe she would have liked me better if she'd known I was her granddaughter.

But was that what I wanted? To be liked for a blood relationship rather than because of the person I was?

By that logic, would my father have loved me if he had just met me around town rather than knowing I was his daughter?

I was well on my way to driving myself crazy when I decided that the only solution was to turn on lights to chase away the demon thoughts.

Caterina's tone when she said her familiar "meep" demonstrated her disapproval. She leaped off the bed and took off for parts unknown.

Fine. Nobody wanted to be around me.

There was only one solution to a night like this: chocolate marshmallow ice cream. We always had a stash of it in the freezer since it was also Ricky's favorite.

I stared into the frozen tundra of the freezer and somehow wasn't surprised that even when I poked into the back corners, there wasn't any ice cream.

Even the freezer was my enemy tonight.

I was not going down in defeat. There were a lot of things I could not control, but this one could be fixed.

After all, I co-owned a diner that served chocolate marshmallow ice cream as one of its daily dessert choices.

I left a note for my father on the kitchen counter: needed ice cream. The odds that he would wake up in the middle of the night and discover that I was out were small, but maybe ice cream cravings ran in the family. I thought about taking Caterina with me, but she had taken her sleepy self off to one of her numerous hiding places so I grabbed my keys and my driver's license. I didn't need money; put it on my tab.

It was a quick and familiar drive to the diner, and I decided to test my character by seeing if I would come to a full halt at stop signs when no other drivers were in sight.

I failed the character test.

Instead of pulling into the back lot, I parked on Main Street in front of the diner. After all, there was no need to parallel park when I was the only car in sight.

Before I got out of my Prius, I texted Elijah Wu to tell him that I would be disarming the alarm system to get some ice cream. I didn't want him to call the police on me.

At least the diner cooperated. I put my code into the keypad lock, turned on the lights, prowled back to the walk-in freezer, and grabbed a half-gallon of chocolate marshmallow ice cream. I didn't think I would eat all of it, but I wasn't going to make any promises. I was going to sit in one of the booths, but then I realized that if one of Fool's Hill's three police officers happened to drive down Main Street, the diner's lights on at midnight would trigger a check. I detoured to grab a spoon and a few napkins and went back to my car.

I planned to take it home and curl up in bed with my new best friend, but my self-control wasn't quite that good. I pushed back my front seat, pried off the lid of the ice cream carton, and dipped in the spoon. Before I could eat my first spoonful, however, I noticed something unusual. Two storefronts down from the diner, in front of Maria Theresa's School of Dance and Tango Parlor, there was another car. I was confused. To me it made perfect sense to make a midnight run to a diner, even if it was closed, but I couldn't figure out why one would visit a dance school. Before I could ponder the oddity of it any more deeply, several things rapidly unfolded.

First of all, I saw the car begin to move, even though its lights weren't on.

Okay. Now I had a new theory. Two illicit lovers were meeting up and didn't want to reveal themselves. They were making an undercover getaway. Fine with me. I'd keep company with my chocolate marshmallow ice cream, and they could do whatever they wanted.

Of course, I had to keep my eyes on the car, though, in case I could gain any clues as to the identity of the late night rendezvous partners. This is a small town, after all. Chances were good that I knew the people.

But what happened next was confounding. Main Street is one way – always has been, always will be. Although it has two lanes, they both head north toward Uncle Goose's Home and Hardware and then on out of town. This car's driver, however, either didn't know that or didn't plan to abide by it. The car made a wild swing away from the curb and, after almost hitting a telephone pole on the other side of the street, began accelerating down Main Street heading in the wrong direction.

In addition to the obvious traffic violation, there was one other serious issue.

The car was headed directly toward my Prius.

I pushed the power button of my car, but there was not nearly enough time to put the car in gear and try to escape.

I knew I was out of time because that's when the world exploded.

Chapter Eighteen

This was not right, not right at all. I'd gotten to heaven, and the clouds should be a lot lighter and fluffier.

"Ms. Callison! Ms. Callison!"

What was Elijah Wu doing in heaven? He was too young to be here. Besides, did this mean that for all eternity I'd still be called by my teacher name? It seemed like I should just be Rue—first names for everybody.

Then I heard the scream of an approaching siren.

Okay, so that was yet another thing that was wrong. There was supposed to be soothing harp music, not what sounded suspiciously like a Fool's Hill police car.

I tried to stir, but I seemed to be entangled in the cloud.

Okay, so maybe my first premise was wrong. I was definitely not in heaven because too many parts of me hurt, and no matter what else I had wrong about heaven, I shouldn't be feeling pain.

Crap. Was I in hell?

No, I finally decided. Although I wasn't happy with whatever these circumstances were, they weren't bad enough for hell.

"Ms. Callison, can you breathe? I've pulled the airbag out of the way." Elijah Wu sounded highly concerned, and I wanted to reassure him.

"I can breathe, but it hurts," I said. That was as reassuring as I could be at the moment.

"Good," Elijah Wu said. "Not that it hurts," he quickly corrected himself, "but that you can breathe."

"If I couldn't, I don't think I'd be able to answer you," I said, a bit testily.

Oh, no. I sounded a lot like Isabel Louise.

I could hear a crackling radio and several voices nearby, but they seemed to be ignoring me. That was okay. I had Elijah Wu to annoy me.

Comfort me, I thought. Get your attitude under control.

"Do you know what happened?" Elijah Wu asked. I could see that he was kneeling on the sidewalk next to my open car door. When I looked in front of me, I could see that my windshield had exploded and that another car was far too close to mine.

It seemed to be inside of the engine compartment of my car. That was definitely too close.

"I just came to get some chocolate marshmallow ice cream," I said plaintively.

"I'm allowed. It's my diner. Well, my father's, too, but it's still okay."

I had some vague theory that I'd been involved in a violent police chase because I'd absconded with a half-gallon of ice cream.

“I know,” Elijah Wu said soothingly. “You texted me so that I wouldn’t be alarmed when I heard noises downstairs.”

“That’s right,” I said, the confusion beginning to lift a bit. “I was being thoughtful.”

“Yes, you were,” Elijah Wu said, “and I appreciated that. But then I heard this horrific crash.”

“I didn’t do it,” I said. “I was just sitting here in my car, having some ice cream.” Then more of the fog lifted. “Some lunatic was parked down in front of the dance studio and suddenly started driving down Main Street the wrong way and crashed right into me.”

“Were you driving when it happened?”

Why was Elijah Wu asking me that? Was he somehow insinuating that I had caused this accident?

“Ms. Callison?”

What was wrong with Elijah Wu’s voice? I looked sharply over to my open car door, which was now filled with Hanlon Smith, one of my former students who was now Fool’s Hill newest police officer.

“I’ve called for a second ambulance,” he said. “I don’t think it’s safe to move you until then. You know, back injuries, neck injuries, head injuries.”

Weren’t police supposed to be like doctors and have something that resembled a good bedside manner? If so, Hanlon Smith needed to go back to the police academy. He was pitiful at this.

Wait. What if he were right? What if I were paralyzed and just didn't know it yet? Panic seared through me like a wave of nausea. Very tentatively, I moved my right arm. Then I moved my left arm. Right foot. Left foot.

Victory. Everything moved.

I suddenly realized that I was doing the post-accident version of Jake's shakedown exercise that he had used to begin his dance class.

"Ms. Callison, are you all right? Are you having a seizure or something?" Hanlon squeaked.

What was it with these guys? If I were having a seizure, would I be able to calmly identify it for him?

I needed to distract him before I started doing "The Macarena." "What about the other car? It just came barreling down the street and crashed into me."

"Officer Rodriguez is dealing with that. She told me to check on you," Hanlon said. "That car looks even worse than yours, and yours looks bad." Well, that hadn't changed since high school. Hanlon had always loved cars and tried to work them into every essay he wrote. He wrote his senior research paper on the rise of the muscle car. I actually learned a lot from it.

"Who was in the other car?" I asked Hanlon.

"I don't think I'm allowed to say," Hanlon replied.

"I want to see Elijah Wu," I said.

Hanlon acted like he was going to deny my order. "I want to see Elijah Wu now," I said firmly.

Teacher voice. Worked every time.

However, instead of Elijah Wu, my father appeared at the car door. "Rue girl, are you okay?"

"Hanlon Smith says my car looks bad," I said mournfully.

"They make more of them every day, but there's only one of you. Are you okay?"

"I think so," I said, tears welling up in my eyes in the face of his kindness.

"How did you know to come here?"

"Elijah Wu called me. Said that you came to get ice cream and then there was a loud crash."

"I didn't do it," I protested. "I was just sitting here eating."

"Didn't say it was your fault, Rue girl. Wouldn't matter if it was."

"Dad, who did this? Who was driving the other car? That person came flying down Main Street the wrong way and just crashed right into me." I paused for a moment. "Like a bat out of hell. Who was the bat?"

"Let me see what I can find out," my father said.

He disappeared from the car door, and I began to consider getting out of my car to gather information myself. These people didn't seem to know much. As I began to try to maneuver my legs out from under the steering wheel, though, I realized it was much closer than it should have been, especially since I now remembered that I had pushed back the seat to have more room to eat. I also realized that my knees hurt.

And so did my chest.

And my face seemed hot, like I suddenly had a bad sunburn.

Was it possible to get sunburned in the middle of the night?

I leaned back and took a deep breath. Things hurt, but at least I wasn't paralyzed. I concentrated on that.

"Ms. Callison? Rue Callison?" When I opened my eyes, there were two new faces at the car door. Who said that Fool's Hill was a sleepy little town that rolled up its sidewalks?

"Yes?" I answered.

"We're paramedics, and we'd like to get you out of this car." The voice was female, calm and professional. I immediately felt reassured.

"Good plan," I said. I obeyed her voice as she gave me very clear and specific instructions about how to move and not move. At one point she secured some kind of uncomfortable collar around my neck. Eventually I ended up outside of my mangled Prius and on a stretcher.

"Can you tell me about this?" the paramedic asked me. I looked down to my hand. Unbeknownst to me, I was still clutching the spoon I had taken from the diner.

"Spoon," I said succinctly.

"Do you often drive holding one?" the paramedic asked, and I liked her even more for the hint of sarcasm.

"I wasn't driving," I clarified. "I was sitting in my car eating chocolate marshmallow ice cream. I wasn't eating and driving. That could be as dangerous as texting and driving, which I don't do, either. Well, except I sometimes drink while I drive." I had a sudden awareness of how bad that sounded. "Not drink alcohol and drive," I said quickly, "drink Diet Coke and drive."

“It’s okay,” the paramedic said calmly, as if she were used to dealing with babbling idiots on a daily basis.

Actually, maybe she was, given her line of work.

“I didn’t even get to eat any of the ice cream,” I said mournfully. “I suppose it’s not any good now.”

The paramedic smiled. “Actually, I’m relieved to know that’s what’s all over the interior of your car.”

I was sad for the wasted ice cream, which even I realized meant that I wasn’t processing reality very successfully at the moment. I tried to refocus.

“You can let go of the spoon now if you’d like,” the paramedic said. “You’re lucky you didn’t impale yourself on it.”

Now that was a terrible thought. How embarrassing for my obituary to read: “Rue Callison died after being impaled by a spoon in a freak accident while eating ice cream in her car at midnight on Main Street in Fool’s Hill, Delaware. Her family and friends ask you to avoid chocolate marshmallow ice cream in her memory.”

I unclenched my fingers and let the spoon fall onto the stretcher. Maybe I’d be the one avoiding chocolate marshmallow ice cream from now on. Way to go, whoever was driving the other car. You wrecked my car and one of my favorite foods.

My stretcher began to move, and my father reappeared on one side with Elijah Wu on the other. “We’re going to take you to the hospital to get you checked out,” my favorite paramedic said.

“I think I’m probably fine,” I protested, although I wasn’t quite ready to leap off the stretcher and make a getaway.

“The ER will determine that,” the paramedic said firmly. “I’m sure the docs there will want to do some X-rays.”

“You need to listen to her,” my father said. “Cooperate, Rue. I’ll follow right behind.”

I sighed. As far as I was concerned, I had been highly cooperative.

I’d put down the spoon, hadn’t I?

Chapter Nineteen

The doctors should just have put me in one of those tubes and X-rayed everything at once. Instead I ended up in one room to have my head imaged and a second room to have my knees X-rayed and a third room to have my torso photographed. I was in a cubicle with curtains in the Emergency Department while the results were checked. My father sat with me, but I could see he was fading and encouraged him to take a break in the waiting room.

I think I dozed off despite the comings and goings of the personnel; when I woke, there was a new face in my field of vision. At first I thought it was yet another doctor or nurse, but then I focused my eyes and realized it wasn't.

In his honor, I sighed.

"I didn't do anything wrong," I said to Detective Haverton. "For once you don't have to interrogate me."

"First of all, how are you feeling?" he asked.

"Very sore," I said, "but I'm not paralyzed."

"That's a very good sign," Detective Haverton said. "How's your head?"

“I think it’s okay. One of the nurses said that it’s normal to get some chemical burns on your face from the airbag, but mine don’t seem to be too bad.”

“Which means your car was running,” Detective Haverton said calmly. “Airbags don’t deploy if the engine isn’t on.”

Oh no. He was not going to blame me for this. I was one hundred percent innocent, thank you very much. “I did not cause the accident,” I said, putting as much force as I could manage into each word.

“I didn’t say you did,” Detective Haverton replied. “I just commented that your car had to be running. That’s a very good thing since the impact could have caused you far worse injuries without the airbag.”

Oh. Okay.

“Can you tell me what happened?”

I closed my eyes and rested for a moment and then began to tell him the strange story: wanting ice cream, going to the diner to get some, sitting in my car to eat some, seeing the car down the street, watching as it barreled toward me, turning on my car to try to get out of its path but not having a chance to even put it in gear.

“Do you know why the car was being driven so erratically?”

How would I know that? Why didn’t he ask the other driver? “No.”

“Do you think the car was deliberately aiming for you?” Detective Haverton asked.

What kind of question was that? Did he think I was such a terrible person that I had assassins lurking on Main Street looking for an opportunity to take me out? “I don’t know why that would be the case,” I said huffily. “It seemed like the

driver was just totally out of control. The car made this wild loop away from the curb and then barreled down Main Street going the wrong direction.”

“Could you see the driver?”

I thought about that. “No. The street lights aren’t very bright, and neither of us had our headlights on.”

“Do you remember the car braking at all before it hit you?”

Again I tried to envision those final horrifying seconds. “No. It just came down the street like a bat out of hell.”

“A bat out of hell,” Detective Haverton said. “Is that a reference to the Meatloaf song?”

I had to think about that. “I think it’s just a reference to bats. They come out at night and they fly fast. I guess they fly fast.” If he wanted bat trivia, he’d be better off talking to Isabel Louise, whom I was sure had all kinds of facts filed away in her brain. All I knew was that they ate a lot of bugs and used some kind of sonar, but that didn’t seem to relate to the current conversation.

“Is there anything else you noticed?”

I had a vague sense that there was something I was forgetting, but I couldn’t grab on to the memory. “I can’t think of anything else. Shouldn’t you be talking to the other driver, anyway?”

Detective Haverton looked away. “Was that your father I saw in the waiting room?”

“I sent him out there to rest for a few minutes,” I said. “He looked tired.”

“Let me go and get him.” Detective Haverton reached for the curtain that constituted the wall of my cubicle.

“Why? He wasn’t there when the accident happened. He didn’t see anything.”

“I’ll be back,” Detective Haverton said. “I need to check on a few things.”

You do that, I thought, as I closed my eyes. I had never realized how exhausting it was to be crashed into.

I was too tired to care that I was ending my thought with a preposition.

I didn’t know how long it was before I heard the curtain slide back again. It could have been minutes, or it could have been hours. Time had become a rather elusive concept for me.

My father and Detective Haverton came in together and stood beside my uncomfortable bed or stretcher or whatever it was. “Did you talk to the other driver?” I asked. I really wasn’t up for answering any more questions.

Detective Haverton looked at my father.

Why was he looking at my father?

My father nodded, which also seemed odd. Exactly what had the two men discussed while I had been out of it?

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible.” Detective Haverton’s voice was somber.

“Why not?”

“The other driver did not survive the crash,” Detective Haverton said.

I gasped. I knew the impact had been substantial, but I had never anticipated that it had been fatal.

“She was not wearing a seatbelt, which contributed to her injuries,” Detective Haverton said softly.

“She?” Why was I surprised by that? Was it a bias on my part that I had imagined that the reckless late-night driver had been a male?

Suddenly I had a terrible thought. “Was it one of the high school students? Some rash teenager who’d been drinking or was acting crazy or was just an inexperienced driver?”

“No,” Detective Haverton said, again looking at my father.

“Rue girl, it’s somebody we both know,” my father said. “We’d rather give you time to get over the shock of what you’ve been through before we tell you, but I don’t want you to hear from somebody else.”

My mind began to race, and none of the possibilities were good.

I looked at my father. “Tell me, Dad.”

“It was Cecille LeBon,” he said.

Chapter Twenty

“Ms. LeBon?” I said, thinking I must have misheard. “What was Ms. LeBon doing out at that time of night?”

I realized that I was holding a double-standard: it was okay for me to be out at midnight making an ice cream run, but I didn’t expect her to be out?

Actually, it was very rare for me to be out that late; normally, I was curled up with my little gray cat. I was used to living the life of a teacher, which meant I was accustomed to going to bed at a reasonable hour and getting up early.

Clearly, my mind didn’t want to deal with what I had just heard, but I needed to focus.

“Oh,” I said, as a piece of the puzzle fit into place.

“Oh?” Detective Haverton asked.

“I bet it had to do with Archibald Zooper.”

“Archibald Zooper?”

What, was this some interrogation strategy to simply keep repeating what a person said?

“Archibald Zooper,” I said.

“Do you think she was meeting him?” my father asked. “It seems like an odd choice to meet on Main Street.”

“There wasn’t a second person in the car,” Detective Haverton commented.

What was wrong with these men? Hadn’t they been following the ongoing drama? I guessed I needed to get them up to speed.

“Ms. LeBon has been leaving notes for Archibald Zooper by slipping them under the door of Maria Theresa’s dance studio,” I said. “It led to a big confrontation between Ms. LeBon and Maria Theresa.”

“What kind of confrontation?” Detective Haverton asked.

“Screaming on the part of Maria Theresa, and taunting on the part of Ms. LeBon,” I answered.

“Where did this take place?” Detective Haverton asked.

“Where else?” I said. “The diner.”

“What do you mean that Cecille LeBon was taunting?” he asked.

“She told Maria Theresa that she could have Archibald Zooper back any time she wanted,”

“Was that true?”

I had to think about that. “I’m not positive, but I don’t think so. You’d have to ask Archibald Zooper.”

“Is it actually relevant any longer?” my father asked.

I looked at him and realized he was right. A romantic triangle doesn’t exist when one of the sides of it is dead.

Dead.

Ms. LeBon was dead.

That did not seem possible to me. She was too contrary to die.

Oh no. "Fee," I said, looking at my father.

"I know. As soon as we're done here, I'll go and tell her." He looked at Detective Haverton.

"I'm just trying to understand what might have happened," Detective Haverton said. He looked at me. "So you think Cecille LeBon might have been on Main Street late at night in order to deliver a note to Archibald Zooper?"

"It seems like a possibility," I said. I tried to recollect what I had seen. "I know that when I parked on Main Street, there were no other cars around, so she must have gotten there while I was inside the diner getting ice cream."

"The car was there when you came back out?"

"Yes. I remember noticing it after I decided to eat some of the ice cream. I pushed back my seat and looked out the windshield, and I saw the car."

"Did you see Cecille LeBon?"

I searched my memory. "No. The next thing I knew, the car took off, looped across Main Street, and headed toward me."

"Like a bat out of hell," Detective Haverton said.

"Like a bat out of hell." This time I was repeating someone who was repeating what I had said. My head was too jolted for this.

Something was nagging at me, something about a bat out of hell, but I couldn't think about bats right now.

“Do you have any idea why she might have been driving so erratically?”

“It just seemed so strange. There was nothing else moving on Main Street. It’s not like another car veered into her lane or a deer ran into her path.”

“Could something have gone wrong with her car?” my father asked.

“That’s an interesting thought,” Detective Haverton said. “It would have to have been a combination of issues that caused both sudden acceleration and steering problems.” He looked back at me. “Was Cecille LeBon known for being an unpredictable driver?”

That was a diplomatic word choice: unpredictable. “I’ve never been in a car when she was driving,” I realized. “Whenever I was with the Brain Trust, Mr. Barnes drove. She might have been driving more now that Fee is back.”

“Fee,” my father said.

“It is kind of you to want to tell her in person,” Detective Haverton said. Then he looked from one of us to the other. “I heard from the lab in Dover that you had more DNA testing done. For some reason, the director seemed to think that I wanted the results expedited.”

Oh yeah. About that. Somehow it didn’t seem like too serious an offense at the moment. “Ms. LeBon might be Fee’s mother,” I explained. “I just wanted to know.”

I’ve always liked the word nonplussed, and that’s how Detective Haverton appeared. It was a new look for him. If circumstances had been different – far, far different – I might have enjoyed it.

“How did this come about?”

I was simply too tired to go into the whole story. "It has to do with a birthmark," I said vaguely.

"Would you be willing to check with Fee about any family members who need to be notified?" Detective Haverton asked my father.

"That kind of depends on the results of the DNA test," I said. "It's a good thing they're being expedited."

"That it is." Detective Haverton said.

The curtain to my cubicle parted to admit a doctor. He seemed surprised to see that I had company. "Ms. Callison," he said, "we've taken a preliminary look at your images, and it looks like you are very fortunate. We'll have a radiologist review them tomorrow, but we see nothing alarming. You will have substantial bruising, but we don't see anything that would cause us to admit you. You can figure on having a lot of soreness, but that will pass."

"So I may leave?"

"If you have someone to take you home, I'll finish the paperwork."

He left, and I looked at my father. "I'll take you home and get you settled before I talk to Fee," he said.

"I'd be glad to take her home," Detective Haverton said. Then he turned to look at me. "If that's okay with you."

"I'd kind of like to get my talk with Fee over with," my father said, "but then I'll be right back home to keep an eye on you."

"Caterina will take care of me," I said. Suddenly the thought of my own soft bed and a purring cat brought tears to my eyes. "I just want to go home."

I was too battered to be a good daughter and support my father on his sad task. I couldn't imagine how Fee would take the news. Cecille LeBon was Fee's best friend, her confidante over the past three decades. She was her only friend in Fool's Hill, maybe in her entire life.

She was also maybe her mother.

Then there was the Brain Trust. This would be a blow to them, too. The three of them had known each other for most of their adult lives, and they were fixtures in each other's existences. It wouldn't seem right for that trio to be down to only two members.

Tears were now streaming down my face. I was exhausted, I was in pain, and I was sad.

My father patted my shoulder and turned to leave. "I'll see you soon."

Detective Haverton walked out with him. When he returned, he was carrying a box of tissues, which he put on the stretcher next to me.

The doctor returned, getting my signature on a bunch of forms. "That was fast," I said.

He looked at Detective Haverton. "I was told to expedite this."

Detective Haverton turned to me. "Maybe I'm useful for something."

Maybe.

"If you pull your car to the Emergency Room entrance, I'll have her brought to you."

"Do you think you can walk?" Detective Haverton asked me.

“She’ll be in a wheelchair,” the doctor said. “Hospital policy. Can you take care of her from there?”

“I will do my best,” Detective Haverton responded. He looked at me. “With her, you never know what will happen next.”

The doctor took the signed forms from me. “My grandmother always used to say, ‘May you live in interesting times.’ I considered that a nice thought until I learned that it’s a translation of a Chinese curse.” He looked at Detective Haverton. “I’ll go expedite the wheelchair.”

Detective Haverton took a tissue out of the box and wiped away my tears. “Rue Callison, times are always interesting with you.”

“Is that a curse?” I asked.

“Just an observation,” he said, and then he pushed aside the curtain and left.

Chapter Twenty-One

I tried to look spry as I got out of the wheelchair and walked the few steps to the open door of Detective Haverton's car. I noticed it was his personal vehicle, a shiny black Mustang, rather than a generic cop car.

"Are you feeling okay? No nausea?" he asked me.

I knew exactly why he was asking me that, and it wasn't concern for my physical wellbeing. He kept that car showroom-meticulous, and the thought that I might barf on it or, even worse, in it, was making his heart palpitate.

Fortunately for him, I was too tired to torment him. "My head hurts, my body hurts, and my heart hurts, but my stomach is fine."

"Okay then," he said, watching as I settled myself into the seat. He gently closed the door behind me and got into the driver's seat.

I found myself surprised at how tense I was. I was scanning every intersection, afraid that a car was going to come racing toward us.

"You can relax," Detective Haverton said. "I've had advanced driving classes as part of my police training, and I'm very good at defensive maneuvering."

I had to give him credit for understanding the source of my anxiety. "I believe you. It's just that I wasn't even moving and got hit; it's going to take me a while to feel anything close to safe in a car."

"I went to the scene of the accident before I came to the hospital to check on you," he said, aiming for casual. "You're going to need to get a new car."

I hadn't gotten that far in my thinking. I couldn't get too worked up about the demise of my little red Prius when an actual human being was dead. "You think it's totaled?"

"I'm certain it's totaled," he said.

"Do I have to get it towed or anything?" I asked, exhaustion crashing over me like a rogue wave. I didn't know how I would marshal the energy to deal with such mundane issues.

"I told the Fool's Hill police to have it towed to the nearest garage after the on-site investigation is completed," Detective Haverton said. "I hope that's all right with you."

"Perfect," I said, closing my eyes and trying to unclench my fists. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Were you on duty tonight?" I asked. "I didn't think detectives were on a midnight shift."

"No, I'm actually off duty," he said.

That was puzzling. "How did you hear about the crash then?" I asked. I knew that because the Fool's Hill police force only had three members and limited

resources, the Kent County Police backed them up on most things bigger than speeding tickets, vandalism, and small town tomfoolery.

Detective Haverton looked nonplussed again. Twice in one night. This was a nonplussing record for him. "I have a request on file."

I opened my eyes to stare at him. "What kind of request?" Then I thought some more. "Oh, so Fool's Hill is your territory if anything happens here?"

"Not exactly," he said. "Why don't you rest until we get to your house?"

Oh, not so fast. Even in my less-than-prime state, I recognized a glaring deflection when it was thrown in my face. "What kind of request?"

"The dispatchers know to notify me if your name comes across," he said.

What? "My name? If the Kent County Police hear my name, they let you know?"

"It seemed safer that way."

"Safer for whom?" I asked.

"Rue, don't take this the wrong way, but it seems like whenever something bizarre happens in Fool's Hill, you're involved. I figured if I knew you were involved, it was a good starting point. Kind of like an early warning alert."

This man had once kissed me, and that's what I was to him? An early warning alert, like a siren that says a hurricane is coming? "So it has nothing to do with keeping me safe?"

"That, too," he mumbled. "Public safety, personal safety – it blurs together."

Oh, does it now? "So what other names are on your 'alert me' list?" I asked.

"None," he said, clearly becoming uncomfortable with this discussion.

“I don’t know whether to be insulted or flattered,” I commented. “Insulted, I think. It’s like you see me as a crime magnet.”

“Well, isn’t that kind of what you are?”

I started to defend myself, but before I could sputter more than “I am not,” I started to see how weak my defense was. There had been a series of unnatural deaths in Fool’s Hill lately, and I had been connected in some way to every one of them.

“Just remember that I have never once been guilty,” I finally stated.

“I am fully cognizant of that, Rue.”

Oh, fully cognizant, now was he? Way to step up the vocabulary instead of simply saying “I know that.” I appreciated his word choice.

“You have to admit that this time, there is absolutely no way that I could have been responsible for anything,” I said.

“Oh, there are ways,” he said.

Now that was offensive. “How on earth could I have contributed? I was sitting in my car, innocently eating ice cream.”

“You could have sabotaged her car,” he said calmly.

“What?” Lesson learned: shrieking made me head throb in ways that could possibly result in throwing up from pain. At the moment, barfing all over Detective Haverton’s pristine leather seats seemed like a splendid idea.

“First of all, I wouldn’t know how to sabotage a car if my life depended on it,” I said, lowering my voice out of consideration for my head, not his ears. “What, you think I drove to Main Street in the middle of the night lugging a satchel full of car

mechanic tools, ran up to Ms. LeBon's car, crawled under it, sabotaged whatever it is that would make it go out of control, dashed back to my car, and got ready to eat my ice cream, all while she walked twenty steps, slipped an envelope under the door of the dance studio, and got back to her car? What am I, some kind of automotive ninja?"

"I don't think I've ever heard anyone use the word 'satchel' before," he said with infuriating calmness.

"It's a perfectly good word," I said.

"I didn't say it wasn't," he replied. "I kind of like it: satchel."

"Try to work it into your everyday conversations," I sniped. "But let's get back to the topic: you really think I sabotaged Ms. LeBon's car?"

"I didn't say I thought you did, Rue. I just said it was possible. There's a big difference between those two."

"But you thought it," I said. "You actually looked at what happened and thought, 'I wonder how Rue could have caused that.'"

He took his eyes off the road to look at me.

"Look where you're going," I snapped.

"I looked at what happened, and I thought, 'I need to get to the hospital and see if Rue is all right.'" There was no banter in his voice.

"Oh."

"We're pulling up to your house, and you forgot to be terrified that another car was going to crash into us," he said.

I was startled to see that had already driven up the road to the house and was parking. "So that was just to distract me?"

"It worked, didn't it?"

"You made my head hurt worse than it already did," I protested.

"Sorry about that." He was out of the car and opening my door before I had done much beyond unfastening my seatbelt. "Watch your head," he said, putting his hand on the top of my head while I carefully extricated myself. Isn't that what the police usually did when loading a prisoner into a car?

I wobbled a bit on the first few steps I took, and he put his arm around me. Although it took me a moment to remember my code, I put in the correct numbers to operate the keypad lock on the front door. He kept his arm around me as I gratefully took in the familiar surroundings. My father must have left on a lot of the lights when he dashed out because the house was aglow.

I led our pitiful little procession into the family room of the part of the house that my father and I shared and sank into the sofa with an audible groan. Detective Haverton took a seat at the other end.

"Meep?" Suddenly there was a small gray body in the space between us.

"Caterina," I said, my eyes filling with tears again. Now I was truly home.

I turned to Detective Haverton. "This is Caterina."

"Hello, Caterina," he said, his voice formal and polite. "We've met at a couple of crime scenes before, but we've never been formally introduced. I'm Gregory Haverton."

Right. I'd forgotten about the crime scenes in which my cat had been inadvertently involved.

Caterina stood absolutely still, staring at him with her gorgeous green eyes. I swear she was assessing his character. I think she gave him a grade of C. She didn't hiss at him or lash out with her sharp little claws, but she also didn't go over and rub against him or purr.

Good girl. It's wise to be cautious. That was one of the things I had come to appreciate about cats. With dogs, just about anybody was a new best friend, and I appreciated that loving extroversion. With cats, however, it took time and patience and effort to win them over. They had to be wooed.

Woo away, Detective Haverton.

Oh wait. He and my cat were on a first-name basis, weren't they? It seemed like every time I was ready to make the leap from calling him Detective Haverton to considering him to be Gregory, another pesky crime intervened to put him back on official footing.

He really hadn't been serious about thinking I could have sabotaged Ms. LeBon's car, could he?

"I really wouldn't have any motive at all for sabotaging Ms. LeBon's car," I blurted out. "After all, I'm waiting for the DNA test results to find out if she is my grandmother. Why would I wish any harm upon her?"

"Rue, I really was just trying to distract you. I knew how hard it was for you to get back in a car, and I wanted to take your mind off of that."

“Well, you succeeded,” I said, “but I don’t want to be a suspect to you yet again.”

“You’re not a suspect to me,” he said.

“I’m an alert,” I said.

“I really shouldn’t have told you that,” he said. “Now you’re going to think I’m some kind of weird stalker. Trust me that I only get alerted about police matters.”

“You mean you don’t know when I go to my uncle’s hardware store or hang out at the diner?”

“Not unless they become crime scenes,” he said. “Really, Rue. Just police matters.”

“Okay,” I said. “Just so I don’t go into the county police headquarters and see my picture on a wall.” I had a sudden vivid image. “The grocery store once had a picture of some man taped to every cash register that said, ‘Do not accept a check from this man. Notify police immediately.’ It’s not like that with me, is it?”

“No, Rue,” he said with a chuckle. “It’s not like that. No wanted posters. I don’t even have you flagged in our facial recognition program.”

“Well, there’s that,” I conceded.

“I think I’d feel better if you were in bed,” he said.

“Excuse me?”

“I don’t know how long your father will be gone, and I don’t like the idea of your walking around the house alone in case you get dizzy or whatever.”

“I’ll be fine,” I insisted. “I’ve got Caterina.”

He looked at the little cat, who was now on my lap. "What does she weigh, five pounds?" he asked.

"Almost ten," I said. She was really small, but she had gotten a very perilous start to life, abandoned by her mother and almost eaten by a fox.

"I stand corrected, Caterina," he said. "Still, even at ten pounds, I don't think she'd be able to break your fall if you lost your balance."

"I could smoosh Caterina," I said, horrified at the thought. "Maybe you're right." My mind raced through potential embarrassment: had I left underwear thrown on the floor? Was my bedroom horrifyingly messy?

Nothing I could do about it now.

"The ER doctor said you could have Tylenol tonight," he said. "Do you have any?"

"There's a bottle in the kitchen in the upper cabinet to the left of the sink."

He came back with two tablets and a glass of water.

"Thank you," I said, swallowing the potential relief gratefully.

"Now about your bed."

Under different circumstances, that could have been provocative.

These were not those circumstances.

Still, it would be a big step to take him into my wing of the house, my personal fiefdom.

Then I heard the door open, and my father and Fee walked in.

"Rue, how are you?" Fee asked. "Your father told me what happened."

"I'm okay. I'm sorry about Ms. LeBon."

“I can’t believe it,” Fee said, her eyes dark with sorrow. “I hope I’m not intruding, but I didn’t want to be alone. Your father was kind enough to bring me here. He couldn’t wait to get back to check on you.”

“I’ll leave you in these capable hands,” Detective Haverton said.

“Thanks,” I said. I wanted to walk him to the door, to tell him how much I appreciated that he had given up his night off to check on me, but by the time I figured out how to get myself onto my feet without yelping, he was gone.

Chapter Twenty-Two

I never realized how much I move around while I sleep. The problem now was that every time I moved, it made something hurt enough to wake me up. There was a benefit, however, which was that waking up interrupted the nightmares that I inevitably experienced. I kept seeing a car charging at me, and I kept seeing bats.

What was it about that bat out of hell image that wouldn't let go?

I waited until six a.m. before I called Miss Henflinger. Fortunately I hadn't taken anything with me beyond my car keys and license last night so my phone had not been damaged. I knew that the Brain Trust had been firm friends for many, many years, and I was certain that I should tell her about Ms. LeBon rather than waiting until word got out. She deserved that respect.

I could tell that she was shocked by the short version of the story that I told her. "And how are you, Ruelle?" she asked.

I assured her that other than aches and bruises, I was fine.

"Do you know where Fiona is?" she asked next.

Fee. To be honest, I wasn't sure of the answer. "My father went to tell her last night and then brought her back here. I don't know what happened next, but she's probably still here."

"Fine. I need to speak to both of you. Let me give the news to Martin, and then we'll meet you at your house."

With that she ended the call.

There was no denying Miss Henflinger. Since she had just invited herself and Mr. Barnes over, all I could do was warn my father that we were getting guests.

And Fee.

I dragged myself into the shower and let hot water pound on my bruised body. The pressure of the water felt like I was being punched, but the warmth was soothing. It was a draw, but at least I was clean.

I didn't want to think about the version of me that Detective Haverton had seen last night.

I put some cream on the red burn marks on my face, ran a comb through my wet hair, and searched for the least painful clothing I could find, which turned out to be oversized sweatpants and an extra-large tee shirt.

I gingerly walked out to the kitchen. I wasn't ready to run sprints, but at least I felt steady. My headache was more of a dull throb than a pounding menace; I felt fortunate.

I reached in the refrigerator for a can of Diet Coke, pouring it into a mug. It was my version of a morning cup of coffee.

“Rue, I thought I heard you out here. How are you feeling?” My father plodded into the kitchen, his eyes red and tired.

“I’m okay,” I assured him. “Sore but nothing scary. By the way, Miss Henflinger and Mr. Barnes are on their way.”

“It’s kind of early for visitors,” my father said.

“I wanted to tell Miss Henflinger before the gossip mill got started,” I explained. “Then she invited herself over, along with Mr. Barnes. I know they must be upset.” Then I took a breath. “She wants to talk to Fee, too.”

“She’s in my guest room,” my father said. “I’ll tell her.”

“Wait a minute,” I said, getting up and walking back to my bedroom. I returned with sweatpants and a tee shirt. “She might need some fresh clothes,” I said, handing them to my father. “No style, but they’re clean.”

“That’s thoughtful of you, Rue girl,” my father said, taking them with a slight smile. “I couldn’t give her news like that and then leave her alone last night.”

“I know, Dad. That’s not the kind of person you are.”

I kind of wished he were, I thought, but then I knew I didn’t mean it. I had been the recipient of a lifetime’s worth of his kindness.

I scouted around in the kitchen for something that resembled breakfast, but the best I could manage was a box of Frosted Flakes and a container of milk. After all, my father and I usually went to the diner for breakfast.

I had barely gotten out some bowls and spoons when I heard a car pull up. I went to the door as Mr. Barnes and Miss Henflinger got out of his car. He was wearing a suitably subdued bowtie, solid navy blue.

“I’m so relieved to see you in one piece,” he said to me.

“Where is Caterina?” were Miss Henflinger’s opening words. “Please tell me that you didn’t have her in the car with you last night.”

I always felt like Miss Henflinger was ready to declare me an unfit cat owner and demand custody of Caterina.

“No, she was safely at home,” I was happy to say, leaving out the part about how I had thought about taking her but hadn’t been able to locate her.

“Small miracles,” Miss Henflinger said. “We must be grateful for small miracles.”

She was right about that.

I led Miss Henflinger and Mr. Barnes to the kitchen table, where I told them to help themselves to cereal. Miss Henflinger looked at me as if I had offered her cauliflower and onions for breakfast. “Is Fiona available?” she asked. “And your father, of course.”

With that, my father and Fee came into the dining room. Fee looked exhausted, and I could only imagine the depths of her loss. She sat down at the table, my father beside her.

“Cecille LeBon could be a difficult woman,” Miss Henflinger began, “but she was, under her defenses, a caring person. Martin and I enjoyed a friendship with her as teaching colleagues. After our retirement, we truly

became friends. We could always count on her for a divergent opinion, and our conversations were more interesting for that.”

“We will miss her deeply,” Mr. Barnes added. “It was stunning news to hear of her unfortunate passing.”

“I don’t know what I would have done for all of the years I was gone without her,” Fee said, her voice shaky. “She always kept me up to date on what was going on, and I know how much she valued her friendship with the two of you. She talked of you constantly.”

“We were quite the unusual trio,” Mr. Barnes said. “Lillian and I were more the forces of rational logic, and she was the one who added that flamboyance to our little group. We needed that. We could have become boring otherwise.”

“Boring? Never,” Miss Henflinger protested, but I could tell her heart wasn’t in it. With that, she reached into the large bag that she had put on the floor by her chair and pulled out a manila envelope. She placed it precisely in the middle of the table.

“Years ago the three of us discussed the fact that we needed to have wills,” she said. She looked at me. “You young people think you are immortal and don’t have to worry about such practicalities, but as the years accumulate, rational people realize that they need to make their wishes clear.”

Mr. Barnes took up the narrative. “So we made back to back to back appointments with a lawyer. We never shared the details of our decisions, but we decided that it would be wise if we each had a sealed copy of the

others' wills. After all, as this tragedy proves, one never knows what the future holds."

My father pointed to the envelope. "So that is a copy of Cecille's will?"

"Yes, it is," Ms. Henflinger said. "You might want to know that we also bought cemetery plots and prepaid our funeral expenses."

I didn't know whether to be awed or disturbed. I'd thought that they specialized in lunches at the diner where they dissected the local and national news, and here they'd been masterminding the kinds of details that I tried to ignore. They truly were adults.

"Are you sure we should look at her will?" my father asked.

"Yes," Miss Henflinger said firmly. "Martin and I are the executors of her will, a service we agreed to perform for each other. I always thought it odd that she was highly reticent to talk about her will, but I believe it makes sense now. After all, her big secret was that she had remained in contact with Fiona."

"I can't imagine that I would be a part of her thinking," Fee said softly. "After all, I ran away. Surely she would have wished to leave her possessions to someone who remained in her life."

"Shall we see?" Miss Henflinger asked, reaching for the envelope. She handed it to Mr. Barnes.

He looked at each of us in turn, waiting until we nodded. Then he carefully loosened the sealed flap and extracted a sheaf of documents.

“This names Lillian and me as co-executors,” he said, putting the first paper face down on the table. “This details her funeral and burial planning.” He put several more sheets on the table. He took out the final document.

“I am correct, aren’t I?” Miss Henflinger asked him.

His eyes scanned the document. “Yes, you are.” He turned to face Fee. “Cecille LeBon left her home and all of her other assets to you.”

Fee stared at him in amazement. Then she put her head down on the table, her shoulders shaking with sobs.

With that, my phone rang. I pulled it out of the pocket of my sweatpants. Who was calling this early?

“Rue Callison?” a formal voice asked. “This is Dr. Shaheena Khan with the results of the DNA testing you ordered. Since you requested that they be expedited per the orders of Detective Haverton, is it appropriate that I share the results with you?”

“Yes,” I said, suddenly feeling my hand begin to shake.

I focused on the words she was saying.

“Thank you,” I said when she stopped talking, unable to get out any additional words as the doctor ended the call.

I stared around the table. “The DNA results are in. Ms. LeBon was Fee’s mother and my grandmother.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

“Cecille always did have a flair for dramatic timing,” Mr. Barnes finally said.

I couldn’t find words to speak. The idea that the woman who had always seemed so dismissive and critical of me was actually my grandmother did not fit into my view of the world. Suddenly it seemed like I had relatives everywhere I turned. Here a mother, there a grandmother, out in Washington State a grandfather and step-grandmother I’d never known – was there no end to this?

Then I had a sudden bolt of an idea. “Isabel Louise,” I said, suddenly finding my voice.

“That’s right,” Miss Henflinger said. She looked at me with something between amusement and pity. “You are related to that girl.”

For some reason, that was a piece that I couldn’t fit into the puzzle no matter how hard I tried. I had always been horrible with those brainteasers that started with something like “Abigail’s brother’s sister’s husband’s niece’s

cousin." Even when I tried to draw a family tree, I always ended up so confused that I was willing to admit to a total lack of concern about Abigail and her convoluted family.

That was another thing that was totally weird about this. I had always figured that I had the simplest family tree ever: basically my father and me. His parents were dead; there went those branches. My mother was gone: there went that branch. We were more of a low bush than a tree. Now, suddenly, there were branches sprouting in every direction.

"Let's see," Mr. Barnes said. "We know that Cecille was Isabel Louise's great-great-aunt. For the sake of simplicity, let's figure that the relationship came through the matrilineal line."

Sure. Let's take the simple route, Mr. Barnes.

"That would mean that Cecille and Isabel Louise's grandmother were sisters. That would make her grandmother's daughter Cecille's niece. If that niece had a daughter, that would be Cecille's great-niece, and if that great-niece had a daughter, that would be Cecille's great-great-niece."

"Of course," Miss Henflinger said, as if this were as easy as pie.

Why do people say that – easy as pie? The person who originated that expression must have never made a pie. They are really hard to make, especially the crust, which I have never mastered. Cakes are easier than pies, especially if you use the box mix. Cookies are easier than pies. That expression needs to be revised.

"What does that make Rue to Isabel Louise?" my father asked.

Great. Back to the tree, which was not as easy as pie, cake, cookies, or any other baked good.

Except maybe a mud pie. I'd always been good at them.

"Let's see," Mr. Barnes said. "If Cecille and Isabel Louise's grandmother were sisters, then the grandmother's child and Cecille's child would be cousins."

"So that means that Fee and Isabel Louise's mother are cousins," Miss Henflinger clarified.

"So Fee is Isabel Louise's second cousin, and Rue is Isabel Louise's second cousin once removed," Mr. Barnes said as if this were a simple matter.

"Once removed from what?" I asked him.

"One generation removed." He looked at me sympathetically. "I'm used to this because there is a lot of genealogy involved in studying history. Your family tree is easy compared to the British royal families. Those Tudors," he said with a despairing shake of his head. "All of Henry VIII's wives added some unnecessary complexity."

From what I remembered of British history, Henry VIII also added some unnecessary deaths – weren't some of those wives beheaded?

Back to the topic at hand. So I now had a second cousin once removed. For some reason, I was relieved that I wasn't Isabel Louise's aunt. That somehow seemed more serious; I mean, there were Hallmark cards for that. I had never seen a selection of cards that started, "To my second cousin once removed on her birthday."

“We shall have to talk to Isabel Louise’s mother and see what information she can provide about the family tree,” Mr. Barnes said. “Of course, the relationship might come through her husband, not her. He might be the one with the genetic connection.”

Stop, I wanted to yell. My brain could not take any more of this. I shoved back my chair and slowly walked into the kitchen. Tylenol was feeling like a necessity right about now. I took the container of milk with me and put it back in the refrigerator. It didn’t seem like anybody had appreciated my attempt at breakfast.

“We need to be going,” Miss Henflinger said briskly, also getting up. “Martin and I will check with the police and the hospital and begin to assume our responsibilities as co-executors.”

“I am immensely grateful,” Fee said. “I don’t even know what to think right now.”

“You’ve been staying with Cecille, so you must have a key to the house,” Miss Henflinger said. “Consider the house yours even though the legalities will take a while to complete.”

“Thank you,” Fee said, “but it doesn’t seem right somehow.”

“Those were her wishes, and she made them both definitive and legal,” Miss Henflinger said, her voice brooking no dissent. “She might not have known that you were her daughter when she made the decision, but she knew that she cared deeply for you and wanted you to be her heir.” She

looked at Mr. Barnes. "As soon as we have a death certificate, we will be able to transfer Cecille's bank accounts to Fiona, correct?"

"I believe so," Mr. Barnes replied, "after the will is probated and any outstanding debts have been paid."

"Bank accounts?" Fee said.

"We may have been underpaid all of our working lives by the school system, but we did earn pensions," Miss Henflinger said primly. "I believe you may be surprised at what Cecille managed to save."

"I feel like the two of you should have that," Fee said weakly.

"Nonsense," Miss Henflinger said. "Martin and I have taken care of ourselves, I'll have you know. That money is yours. Do with it as you choose. At least it will allow you to pay property taxes, homeowner's insurance, utilities, and all the other practicalities of life that you have avoided until this point."

Did Miss Henflinger just cast a bit of shade on Fee?

I loved that woman – feared her, but loved her.

I walked to the door with Miss Henflinger and Mr. Barnes.

"Thank you both," I said, hoping they could tell how heartfelt my gratitude was. "We wouldn't have known where to start without you."

"We know how difficult this must be for you," Mr. Barnes said, placing a gentle hand on my shoulder. "You didn't even have a chance to process the fact that you had a grandmother right here in Fool's Hill before she was gone."

"It's a lot," I admitted.

“Henry has requested a visit from Caterina,” Miss Henflinger said. Clearly she was not comfortable with all of the emotion.

“He has?” I asked skeptically. Even though Henry lived with Miss Henflinger, Caterina still viewed it as her job to put him in his place. Despite his reputation for being a hellcat, she had finished off their first meeting by bopping him on his nose, and he had been wary of her ever since.

“Yes, he has,” Miss Henflinger said firmly.

I translated what she was saying: she wanted me to come to her house. I also knew why. She needed to see if there was more information to add to the story of the accident.

If there were, then she would see it as her job to figure it out.

Since I would see it as my job, too, I knew I would be at her kitchen table sooner rather than later.

“Would you be available around two o’clock?” I asked. I needed to try to get my headache under control before I tried to do any more thinking.

She looked at Mr. Barnes. “That should give us enough time to complete our business, don’t you think?”

“If not, we can call Rue and postpone,” he said somberly.

“Thank you again,” I said.

“I’ll tell Henry about Caterina’s impending visit,” Miss Henflinger said, turning around and heading for the car.

Crap.

Car.

How was I going to get there when I didn't have a car?

I walked back to the dining room, where my father was on the phone. All I heard him say was "Thanks, Jerry. I'll check with my daughter, but one way or the other, I'll see you in an hour or so."

"Check with your daughter about what?" I asked.

"My buddy Jerry works at the Toyota dealership over in Pine Acres," he said. "I was going to take Fee there today to continue her search for a used car. We didn't find quite the right one yesterday."

"She has a bigger budget to work with now," I said. I truly didn't mean for that to sound as snarky as it did.

"I will only be spending the money I already have," Fee said, after giving me a searching look.

I needed to get a grip on my mouth. This woman had just found and lost her mother, a much more emotionally draining version of what I was feeling.

"Anyway, I checked with Jerry and he has a brand new red Prius sitting on the lot. I thought you might want to look at it." Then he smacked his forehead with his hand. "Of course, you might not want another Prius. Or another red one. You might not want something that could remind you of the accident. Sorry, Rue. I got ahead of myself on this one. I was just trying to help."

“Dad, I haven’t thought this through yet, but I think you’re exactly right. I liked that car, so why go through all the grief of trying to figure out if there’s another one I’d like better?”

“But what about a different color, maybe?” Fee asked.

I tried, but my contrary streak was strong and deep. “No,” I said defiantly. “I like red. That’s what I want. My father understands me perfectly.”

Crap. Now she looked like I’d slapped her.

“Sure you don’t want a truck?” my father asked, trying to defuse the tension.

“No truck,” I replied. “By the way, Dad, maybe you should shop for a new truck while we’re there. Betty Ford is pretty ancient.”

“Don’t talk about her that way,” my father replied with a drawl. “She has plenty more good miles in her.”

“Yeah, those miles after 200,000 are bound to be good,” I said, going along with him.

“What are you talking about? She’s barely over 150,000.”

“I need to change clothes,” I said. “I’ll meet you at Betty in fifteen minutes.”

“You look fine,” my father said. I could tell he was eyeing the bruises that were blossoming wherever skin was visible.

I didn’t tell him that I thought car shopping might require underwear.

Chapter Twenty-Four

I don't understand why it takes people more than ten minutes to buy a car. There it was, a shiny new red Prius. My dad's friend Jerry showed me the new features that my previous Prius didn't have; suddenly, those seemed more important than they had when I bought my previous car. Side air bags? Of course I needed them. Lane departure warning and blind spot detecting? Essential. Better rear vision camera? Yes, please.

What pushed me over the edge, though, was the heated steering wheel. Okay, so that was pure indulgence, but it would feel great on those cold morning drives to school.

Test drive? Why? I knew how a Prius drove. I went inside to complete the paperwork. Hopefully I'd be able to pay down part of the loan when I got an insurance payment for my previous car.

By the time I walked outside, Fee had settled on a six-year-old Camry. It was blue and looked fine to me.

I am definitely not a car person.

I mean, I had just made a huge investment, and the only thing I was excited about was the heated steering wheel.

That and the fact that it was under warranty. It could be a harsh world out there for cars. Just ask my previous Prius.

I don't know what Fee and my father ended up doing, but I went home. I lowered the blinds in my room and crawled into bed. I tried to calm my mind and rest my body. Mainly, though, I listened to Caterina purr.

When everything else was confusing, there was nothing more reassuring than the purring of a cat curled up beside me.

Eventually I roused myself, put Caterina in her tote bag, and headed for Miss Henflinger's. It was probably a good thing that I had a specific time and destination; otherwise, I might have stayed in bed for days.

Caterina and I were no more than inside Miss Henflinger's door when my cat took off. Normally she made a beeline for Miss Henflinger, one of her favorite people in the world, but this time she had a different mission. I followed, a bit concerned.

"Caterina Henflinger Callison," her godmother said in her best teacher voice, "this is Henry's home. Please be respectful of that."

I wasn't even surprised that Caterina skidded to a stop about six feet away from Henry, who was standing in the kitchen, tail twitching in that cat language that means all is not well.

One slow step after another, Caterina advanced on Henry. When she was only about a whisker away – literally – she stopped. I tried to send her a nonverbal plea: don't bop him on the nose.

Caterina stared at Henry for second after long second, and then she slowly blinked, turned around, and came back to me. Even though it hurt, I bent over to stroke her. "Good girl, Caterina."

"Don't sound so surprised," Miss Henflinger said sharply. "She and I have an understanding."

"And what is that understanding?" I asked, taking a seat at the familiar maple kitchen table.

"That's between us," she said.

"This is Henry's house now."

"Yes, but Caterina was here first. That counts, too." She looked affectionately at the little cat. "If I hadn't spent time with Caterina, I doubt that I would have agreed to adopt Henry."

"Meep," Caterina said. I couldn't tell if she was approving or disapproving of Henry's addition to the Henflinger household.

I looked at Henry, whose tail was still twitching. "You owe Caterina big time," I told him. "You know that you have a wonderful home here."

"Whee," Henry said in his wonderfully sarcastic tone of voice. Then, with wounded dignity, he walked out of the kitchen and headed down the hallway.

With that I heard the front door open and footsteps approach the kitchen. It did not escape my notice that Mr. Barnes did not need to knock.

“Ruelle, I know you have been through a lot, but do you feel up to a whiteboard session?” Miss Henflinger asked after Mr. Barnes had seated himself.

I knew exactly what that meant. Miss Henflinger had a large whiteboard on wheels, and whenever we had a situation to decipher, that’s where she organized our thinking. It was a staple of the Brain Trust, and I had been involved more often than not lately.

“Yes,” I answered. After all, I knew what was ahead when I agreed to come here today. I felt like I owed it to Ms. LeBon’s two loyal friends. Besides, no matter how much I went over in my mind what had happened last night, I still felt like I was missing something.

I had a strong feeling that it was something important, which made it all the more frustrating that I couldn’t bring it to the forefront of my mind. Maybe talking it through with Miss Henflinger and Mr. Barnes would help.

“Let’s follow our normal protocol, even though there well might be an innocent explanation for what occurred. After all, perhaps she had a medical situation occur, a stroke or an aneurysm or some such event. Another possibility is that her car could have malfunctioned,” Miss Henflinger said, picking up a black marker from the whiteboard’s ledge. Using a yardstick to guide her, she drew the grid: suspects, motive, means, opportunity. “But as an

intellectual exercise, let's consider that there was some form of foul play. Shall we begin?"

I gave a wry smile. "In honor of Ms. LeBon, I should be the first suspect." Somehow, whenever we began brainstorming, she would always insist that I take the place of dubious honor at the top of the list.

"If you insist, Ruelle," Miss Henflinger said, neatly printing my name in the first box in the suspects column. "What is your motive?"

"She annoyed me?"

"Very weak motive," Miss Henflinger said, even as she wrote it in the next box. "If we did away with everyone who annoyed us, there would be a serious population shortage. What about the fact that she kept your mother's existence a secret from you for most of your life?"

"There is that," I had to admit.

"Plus she hurt your father, and we know how protective you and your father are of each other."

The way the motives were piling up, we didn't need any more suspects.

"I suggest Maria Theresa," Mr. Barnes said, taking mercy on me. "Her motive would be jealousy over Cecille's continued interest in Archibald Zooper."

"Duly noted," Miss Henflinger said as she wrote. "What about Archibald Zooper himself?"

Aw. I liked the little man, but being on the whiteboard was not a mark of shame. After all, look at all the times my name had been up there.

“Motive?” Mr. Barnes asked.

“Too much drama,” Miss Henflinger said. “Cecille was endangering his relationship with Maria Theresa, and he lost his patience.”

“I feel like I’m channeling Ms. LeBon again, but what about a Mafia hit man?” I suggested. “After all, Maria Theresa was married to a mobster, so she undoubtedly knew people in that world. She could have hired someone to take out her competition. She was really furious with Ms. LeBon after that first note under the door, and she was even more irate when Ms. LeBon announced that she could have Archibald back any time she wanted him.”

“Oh, Cecille,” Mr. Barnes sighed.

“Any time something untoward befalls a teacher, there’s also the possibility of a vengeful former student,” Miss Henflinger said, continuing to write on the whiteboard.

“She’d been retired for a long time,” I said. “Wouldn’t a student she failed or offended or whatever have acted before this?”

“Vengeance can fester over time,” Miss Henflinger said calmly.

“Sometimes time heals, and sometimes it exacerbates.”

Exacerbates. What a good word, even if the concept of time exacerbating student grievances was worrisome. I’d had to fail my fair share of students, and I was sure they didn’t remember me with fondness.

Miss Henflinger stepped back and looked at the whiteboard with satisfaction. "This is a good start," she said. "We have no need to go any further until we know what actually occurred."

I needed to admit to my uneasiness before this session ended. "I wish I could be hypnotized," I blurted. "I feel like there's something I'm forgetting."

"You experienced a great shock," Mr. Barnes said. "Of course it's difficult to recall what happened."

"I just feel like there's something important I'm missing," I said, refusing to accept his kindness.

"Then let's see what we can do. We can't hypnotize you, but maybe we can focus your memories." His voice was calm and soothing. "Close your eyes. Try to see the events as if you're watching a movie. You know you are safe. You are outside of yourself, watching everything unfold. Tell us what you see."

"I wanted that chocolate marshmallow ice cream," I said, feeling a bit foolish. "I planned to drive home and eat it there, put it in a bowl and everything, but I couldn't wait. I'd picked up a spoon in the diner just in case, and I pushed back my car seat and pried off the lid of the ice cream. When I looked out, I noticed that there was a car in front of Maria Theresa's School of Dance and Tango Parlor. I was surprised since when I parked, I remember thinking that I had all of Main Street to myself and didn't have to worry about parallel parking. Then all of a sudden, the car came to life. It swerved away from the curb and was heading toward me like a bat out of hell."

Wait.

Bat out of hell.

I remembered.

Now I remembered.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“What do you remember?” Mr. Barnes asked calmly.

“Bat out of hell,” I said, keeping my eyes closed. “I couldn’t get that expression out of my head.”

“It is rather vivid,” Miss Henflinger said. “I wouldn’t have allowed it in my classroom, but it isn’t terribly offensive.”

“It’s that I saw a bat,” I said.

“That’s unusual,” Mr. Barnes said, “not that we don’t have plenty of bats around this area, but it’s more customary to see them out in the country, not on Main Street. I bet you have a lot of them around your pond.”

“We do, but that’s not what I’m talking about,” I said, fighting to hold on to the image. “It wasn’t an actual bat, more like a figurative bat.”

I could hear Miss Henflinger take a deep breath. “You saw a figurative bat?”

I needed to explain this the right way, for myself as well as for them.

“When I first saw the car begin to move, during the very opening seconds, I

saw somebody get out of the car.” I tried do what Mr. Barnes had recommended and watch the scene unfurl like a movie.

“Did Cecille get out of the car and then get back in?” Mr. Barnes asked.

“No. This person got out of the back. I saw the back door on the driver’s side open, and then a dark figure got out.”

“A bat?” Miss Henflinger asked skeptically.

“Not an actual bat, but someone who reminded me of a bat,” I explained. “The person was dressed all in black, and it seemed like he or she was wearing something that was kind of flowing. That’s what made me think of bat wings.”

“Good job, Rue. So somebody got out of the back of the car? Could you tell if it was a man or a woman?” Mr. Barnes asked. He should do this for a living. He was excellent at keeping a calm, even tone of voice that permitted me to keep accessing the scene.

“Yes. I was so focused on what the car was doing that I didn’t pay much attention. That’s when the car began that wild loop, and I was focused on whether or not it would hit the telephone on the opposite side of Main Street.”

“But it didn’t hit the telephone pole,” Mr. Barnes said.

“No. It continued in this crazy circle, and then it straightened as if it were going to go down Main Street in the wrong direction, but then it crashed into me instead.”

“Could you tell if the car was being aimed at you?” Mr. Barnes asked calmly. Hadn’t Detective Haverton questioned me about the same thing?

“I don’t know for sure, but I don’t think so. It seemed like the car was totally out of control, and I just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. If my car hadn’t been there, it might have continued right into the front of the diner.”

“What about the bat person?” he asked, his voice just as calm as if he’d asked a normal question.

“I didn’t see anything more of the bat person,” I said. “There was a horrific jolt, my airbag exploded, and the next thing I knew Elijah Wu was there beside me, asking if I was okay.”

“So Elijah Wu was there?” Miss Henflinger asked.

“Yes. I’d texted him to warn him that I was coming to get ice cream at the diner so that he wouldn’t be alarmed if he heard me. Then he heard the crash and came to check on me.”

I opened my eyes when I heard Miss Henflinger push back her chair and walk back to the whiteboard. She wrote Elijah Wu’s name on the suspects list.

“Then Elijah Wu could have been the bat person,” she said. “He was right there in the vicinity.”

“No,” I said reflexively. I could not allow her to think badly of him. “He was not the bat person.”

“How can you be certain of that?” Mr. Barnes asked quietly.

“Elijah Wu wears jeans and flannel shirts all the time, all year round,” I said. “He doesn’t wear black. Besides, what possible motive would he have to harm Ms. LeBon?”

“That remains to be seen,” Miss Henflinger said. I realized that no matter what I said, Elijah Wu’s name was not coming off the board.

Fine. He could keep me company up there.

“So you feel confident that you saw someone get out the back of Cecille’s car as she began to drive erratically?” Mr. Barnes asked.

Okay, so this was my opportunity to backpedal. I could claim that my mind had been so jolted by the subsequent crash that I was imagining things. I could say that it was just an impression I had, not actual knowledge.

But I now knew that I was right. What I had seen had made that bat out of hell image stick to the edges of my memory.

“Very interesting,” Miss Henflinger said, tapping the whiteboard with her index finger. “It does clarify a key issue.”

“What’s that?” I asked. If there was anything I was lacking right now, it was clarity.

“If we now hypothesize that there was an unknown person in the back seat of Cecille’s car, then that person scared her, causing her to drive in a panic.”

“Even more than that, think of the geometry of it, Lillian,” Mr. Barnes said. “Imagine that you are at the steering wheel, and imagine that you have already started the car and have it in gear. Then you become aware that somebody is lurking in the back seat, somebody you didn’t expect. What is your reaction likely to be?”

“My reaction would be to put the car in park and vacate the vehicle,” Miss Henflinger said firmly.

“Now think like Cecille,” Mr. Barnes said.

“That’s a challenge,” Miss Henflinger retorted.

“I know,” I said suddenly, not willing to admit that I was more like Ms. LeBon than Miss Henflinger but understanding exactly what Mr. Barnes was thinking. “I’d keep my hands on the steering wheel, but I’d turn to look over my shoulder to see who was in the car.”

“And if, in her panic, she jammed her foot on the gas, then you might end up with that wild loop that you described,” Mr. Barnes said.

“So the bat person bailed out of the car when the loop began, but Ms. LeBon couldn’t regain control of the car before she crashed into me.”

“Exactly,” Mr. Barnes said, looking quite pleased with his logic.

“That was a nonsensical reaction,” Miss Henflinger said.

“When something is totally unexpected and frightening, nonsensical reactions can happen,” I said. “I can’t pretend that I would have done a better job under the circumstances.”

“I would have hoped you would have kept your wits about you,” Miss Henflinger said, “especially if Caterina had been in the car with you.”

I looked around for my cat, who was now curled up on Mr. Barnes’ lap. I guess she found him soothing, too.

“So if this explains what happened, who was in her car?” I asked.

Miss Henflinger tapped the non-writing end of her marker next to each name on the suspects list. "I suppose we can take your name off," she said. "I can't imagine a timeline where you would have been in the back of Cecille's car and then leaped out doing your bat imitation and gotten back to your car and seated yourself inside before she crashed into your car."

"Thank you," I said, gratified to see her erase my name. "I assure you that I was not the bat person."

"So now there are two immediate questions," Miss Henflinger said. She raised one finger. "First, who was in the back of Cecille's car? The only person up here who can be eliminated is Ruelle."

I wanted to argue again for Elijah Wu's innocence, but I restrained myself.

That seemed like the only question that mattered, but I was curious. "What's the second question?"

"Are you going to tell Detective Haverton about this?"

Chapter Twenty-Six

Crap.

The thought of calling Detective Haverton to tell him that I had seen a bat person get out of Ms. LeBon's car before it crashed was not high on my list of fun things to do.

I could hear his sigh.

I could hear his doubts, voiced or unvoiced, about whether or not my memory was accurate.

I could see that look in his eyes that meant, "Here we go again. Rue is in the midst of yet another one of my cases."

It was a guarantee that although he and Caterina might be on a first name basis, he would have to remain Detective Haverton to me.

"Do I have to?" I asked Miss Henflinger and Mr. Barnes, sounding like a child who didn't want to go to bed.

"It is your choice," Mr. Barnes said.

"What happens if I don't?" I asked.

“Think about it, Ruelle,” Miss Henflinger said. “What if the information somehow comes out at a later date? Don’t you think he’ll be annoyed if he finds out that you knew this crucial tidbit of information all along?”

I didn’t think annoyed would quite cover his attitude. I figured it would give him grounds to arrest me, and I wouldn’t put it past him to do just that.

I stared at the whiteboard. “Wait,” I yelped. “Maybe there’s an innocent explanation. Put Fee’s name up there.”

Miss Henflinger added Fee’s name and then stared at me, awaiting my explanation.

“Maybe Fee fell asleep in the back seat of Ms. LeBon’s car. After all, Fee’s been living with her, and they go places together. Maybe Fee fell asleep, and then she woke up and scared Ms. LeBon and jumped out of the car.”

“There are a few holes in that story,” Miss Henflinger said reprovngly. “First of all, why would Fiona fall asleep in the back of the car when she had a perfectly fine guest room in Cecille’s house?”

“I don’t know,” I said grouchily. “You know how some people have to drive babies around to get them to fall asleep? Maybe Fee’s like that.”

“Why would she be in the back seat?” Miss Henflinger continued. “Why wouldn’t she be in the front like a normal passenger?”

“How am I supposed to know? Maybe she wanted to stretch out.”

“And why would she jump out of the car? Why wouldn’t she stay to reassure Cecille that it was someone friendly and non-threatening?”

“I thought there were no wrong theories in brainstorming,” I said, unable to keep the sulkiness out of my voice.

“You’re right,” Miss Henflinger said, “but we all know that some ideas are better than others.”

“You’re avoiding the decision you have to make,” Mr. Barnes said, his eyes meeting mine. “Are you going to tell Detective Haverton what you have remembered?”

Suddenly I arrived at a compromise. That’s a mature way to deal with a situation, right? “Maybe I should tell the Fool’s Hill police instead.”

Miss Henflinger snorted out a laugh. “Do you think that would help? You know exactly what would happen next: either they’d tell Detective Haverton, or they’d make you tell him. When it comes to investigating possible murder cases, they’re in over their heads.”

Murder case? My mind hadn’t made the leap to the possibility that the bat person had contributed to a death.

“I have to tell him, don’t I?” I felt that same resignation I felt when I got called to the principal’s office.

“I think it would be wise,” Mr. Barnes said.

“Just be certain that he keeps you updated on any progress he makes,” Miss Henflinger said. “Cecille was our friend. If someone contributed to her demise, then we want to know about it.”

Right. We had circled all the way around to why I had called her at six a.m. this morning. Miss Henflinger, Mr. Barnes, and Ms. LeBon had a long and

rich shared history. Although Miss Henflinger was treating this like an intellectual exercise, it was also very personal.

“Fine. I’ll call Detective Haverton,” I said.

“No time like the present,” Miss Henflinger said.

I couldn’t think of an appropriate retort, so I pulled out my phone and called his number.

Yes, it was on speed dial.

“This is Rue Callison,” I said after he answered. Why couldn’t he have been busy and let this call go to voice mail?

“I know,” he said. Right. When my number came through, red lights probably flashed and sirens sounded. “How are you feeling? I was going to call you a bit later and check on you.”

Hmmm. Check on me as Detective Haverton or Gregory?

“I’m sore and headachy, but otherwise I’m okay. I replaced my car today.”

“What did you get?” he asked, as if we were simply two acquaintances having a casual, boring conversation.

“A red Prius,” I said.

“You replaced a red Prius with a red Prius? How . . .”

“Don’t say boring,” I snapped. “I am not boring. I just know what I like.”

“I have applied many words to you, but never boring.”

I took a deep breath. Time to end the prologue to this conversation.
“I’ve remembered something.”

“About the accident?” he asked, his voice suddenly clicking into formal register.

I wanted to be snarky and say something like, “No, about the Phillies’ starting center fielder,” but I knew better. “Yes. It’s going to sound strange,” I said instead.

“Of course it is,” he said, his professionalism slipping just a tad. “What have you remembered?”

“Right after Ms. LeBon’s car started moving, somebody opened the back door on the driver’s side and jumped out. The person was dressed all in black in something that kind of flowed.”

“That’s your bat out of hell,” he said.

I was happy with him for making the connection. “Yes. That’s the image that was stuck in my brain, even though I couldn’t figure it out for a while.”

“That’s understandable,” he said. “You sustained quite an impact. I’m sure it jolted things around. Plus you were focused on the car that was heading toward you.”

“Thank you,” I said. “There wasn’t a body in the road or anything, was there?” Suddenly I figured I’d better check on the wellbeing of the bat person.

“Definitely not,” Detective Haverton said. “I might have mentioned if there was a random body at the scene.”

“That’s a relief, I guess.”

“Do you know if it was a male or a female?”

“I’ve thought a lot about that,” I said. “It seems like I should be able to tell the difference, but I can’t. My glimpse of the person was very brief since I immediately focused on the car. The street was dark, and the person was dressed in black, and all I have is that vision that he or she was wearing something that kind of flowed. I didn’t catch any look at a face or hair or anything. My sense is that the person had on a black hooded sweatshirt or something like that with a long coat over it.”

“Not typical attire for a summer night,” Detective Haverton commented.

“Not at all, which means the person must have dressed to not be seen.” This was getting weirder and weirder since it now seemed to be a premeditated act. “Do you know if the person harmed Ms. LeBon before she began to drive? Was she shot or strangled or something?”

“I don’t know. We’ve requested an autopsy already, so that should provide some answers.”

“Could you expedite it?” I asked.

“I can try. It seems that I’ve been expediting all kinds of things lately.”

“Do you know that Ms. LeBon was Fee’s mother and my grandmother?”

“Yes. Dr. Khan contacted me about that. My condolences to you and Fee on your loss.”

“It’s so sad to think that we don’t have the chance to work through that with her,” I said, finally acknowledging the fact that I had missed out on the opportunity to shift my thinking into seeing Ms. LeBon as somebody who was part of my family. “Will you keep me informed?”

“Of course. Thank you for passing along what you remembered. It could be very important.”

“You’re welcome.”

“At least it sounded like he took you seriously,” Miss Henflinger said.

“He had already ordered an autopsy, so he’ll know if the person attacked Ms. LeBon before the accident,” I said. My mind was racing with possibilities, none of them pleasant.

“You’ve done a good job, Rue,” Mr. Barnes said. “Thank you for trusting us with your memories.”

“You helped me remember,” I said. “I appreciate that. That sense that I was forgetting something important was really bothering me.”

I turned to Miss Henflinger. “May I leave Caterina with you for a bit longer? There’s something I want to do.”

“Of course. Caterina is always welcome here.”

I walked out to my unboring red Prius and began to drive, turning on the radio and trying to put aside my fears.

Every other car on the road is not out to get you, I chanted to myself. I needed to trust this shiny new car to protect me. I needed to make friends with it.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I went to the diner where I got a much-needed Diet Coke and settled in an empty booth. I realized that I hadn't eaten so I ordered some French fries, well done. I made a new personal rule on the spot that the day after my surprise grandmother crashed her car into me, I'm allowed to eat anything I want.

Of course, there are many normal days when I eat French fries as a meal, so I didn't really need to justify the choice to myself.

I didn't see Elijah Wu, so I texted him and asked him to meet me. I could hear his footsteps pounding down the stairs, and he came through the door into the back of the diner.

"I just learned how to install a tiled backsplash," he said. "Geometry and precision. It's all about keeping the spacing between the tiles even. Your workers are artists."

“I’ll let you get back to it, but I have a few questions first,” I said. “I’m trying to understand exactly what happened last night, and I need to figure out how what you saw fits into what I remember.”

“Of course,” Elijah Wu said, “but I’m afraid I can’t be of much help. I heard noises downstairs in the diner, but I didn’t worry about it because I knew you were coming in to get ice cream.”

“Right. I texted you about that. So did you come down then?”

“No,” Elijah Wu said. “It sounded like all you wanted to do was pick up the ice cream. It was midnight, after all, and I figured you’d want to get home again.”

“So when did you come outside?”

“After I heard the crash. I didn’t think there were likely to be many cars on Main Street at that time of night, and I was afraid that you were involved in some way so I came running.”

“You didn’t see the car come down the street and crash into me?”

“No. When I got there, the crash had already happened. I managed to get the door open on your side to see if you were okay. Oh, and I called 911. And then I called your father.”

“Thank you for that,” I said. “Did you see any other people around?”

“Not until the police got there, and then the ambulance crews. Why do you ask?”

“I have a recollection that somebody got out of Ms. LeBon’s car when it first started to move, and I wondered if you saw anybody else around.”

“I was pretty focused on getting to you, but I think I would have noticed if somebody else was in the vicinity,” Elijah Wu said. “Do you have any idea who it might have been?”

“No, just somebody dressed in black.”

“Hold on a minute. Let me get something.” Elijah Wu said, moving back toward the stairs.

I texted Leah, who immediately responded that she would meet me at the diner. I felt like she was a chapter or so behind in my life, and we didn’t let that happen.

Elijah Wu returned carrying his laptop. “I checked the footage from the diner’s front security camera, but I wasn’t looking for a person,” he said. “The footage didn’t show much beyond the actual crash since its focus is more on our front door area and the sidewalk beyond that.”

“I hadn’t even thought about the security cameras,” I said.

“You don’t need to,” Elijah Wu said. “That’s part of why you let me live here.”

“I still consider that a great deal,” I said.

“As I do,” Elijah Wu responded. “I can’t say that I miss living in my parents’ basement.”

“My dad and I don’t worry about the diner at all knowing that you’re around, especially at night.”

“Let’s see if the footage shows anything,” Elijah Wu said, his fingers dancing over the keyboard. “Here’s the crash itself.” He turned the laptop to

face me, but he must have seen me flinch. "I'm sorry. That would be upsetting for you to see, wouldn't it? I wasn't thinking. Let me look at it myself."

I had to admit that I didn't want to see the crash that had killed Ms. LeBon unfold on the security footage. I got up and went to the kitchen where I ordered a disgustingly healthy bowl of vegetable soup and a salad for Leah since the diner was due to close soon.

I went back to Elijah Wu, who seemed to be done studying his laptop. "I can't see another person. There definitely wasn't anybody around your car."

"What about other businesses on Main Street? Do any of them have security cameras?"

"We're the only one with outside security," he said. "Several other business owners came down and asked me about ours when they saw them being installed, but nothing's up and operational."

"Nothing at Maria Theresa's Dance Studio and Tango Parlor?" I asked.

"I've told her what she needs to get, but she hasn't gotten around to it yet," Elijah Wu answered. "That would have been helpful, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, but this is Fool's Hill," I said with an attempt at a smile. "Lots of people don't even lock their houses or their cars. No wonder the businesses don't worry much about security cameras." I thought about Uncle Goose and his hardware store. "Have you talked to my uncle about increasing security at his place?"

“Let’s just say that it’s an ongoing discussion,” Elijah Wu said with a smile. “I want him to, and he doesn’t want to. He’s winning the argument as of now since he’s the owner.”

“I’ll try talking to him,” I said.

“Good luck with that,” Elijah Wu said. “Remember that this is the man who keeps his entire inventory in his head and considers the word ‘computer’ to be a curse.”

“At least now he has a hardware store cat.” I smiled at the thought of Agatha, once a library cat whose owner had died and who had now found a second career as Uncle Goose’s assistant. She had latched on to Uncle Goose with surprising rapidity, and they were now inseparable. I had a sneaking suspicion that she slept on the pillow next to him.

“I would rather he had something more than a cat to protect him,” Elijah Wu said.

“Baby steps,” I reminded him. “May I ask you one more thing?”

“Anything,” he said, although he looked a bit apprehensive.

“It’s about Isabel Louise.”

Elijah Wu sighed.

That seemed to be a pretty typical reaction to Isabel Louise.

“What about her?” he asked cautiously.

“It turns out that Ms. LeBon was Fee’s mother and my grandmother,” I said. “As near as I can tell, she is my second cousin, once removed.”

Bless his heart, Elijah Wu tried his very best, but he couldn't help himself. He burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?" I asked, although I understood his impulse and kind of wanted to laugh right along with him.

"I just had this image of you and Isabel Louise opening Christmas presents and singing carols."

I had to laugh. "I'm not sure that she's a carol-singing kind of girl."

"She's more likely to give you an explanation of why frankincense and myrrh were better presents than they sound like," Elijah Wu admitted. "And Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer? She would be highly offended that an animal who obviously had severe allergies was being taken out of his native habitat."

"I get annoyed with those twelve days of ridiculous presents," I admitted. "Who thinks it's a good idea to give somebody swans and milkmaids and chickens? I can't even imagine what Isabel Louise would think."

"I would recommend that you don't give her any livestock as a gift," Elijah Wu said.

I yanked myself back to the topic. "Do you think she will embrace the idea of more family members?"

"That's hard to say," Elijah Wu admitted. "I mean, she's the one who noticed Fee's birthmark, which is what raised the entire possibility of a genetic connection, and she didn't seem especially concerned. I thought

she'd want to talk about it, but she was right back to arguing with me about the best hydraulic system to use with pontoons on my drone."

I'd have to think about that sequence of events. If Isabel hadn't been in the diner that day, and if she and I hadn't bumped into Fee and drenched her in tea, which caused her to pull up her tee shirt just enough to show the birthmark, then Cecille LeBon's death would be that of a member of the Brain Trust, a woman who didn't even like me all that much and had kept a very significant secret from me for more than thirty years. Would that be easier than knowing that she was my grandmother?

Then I shook my head and cleared away that line of thinking. What difference did it make? Those events had happened, and there was now DNA evidence of our family connection.

I realized that Elijah Wu was standing and staring at me silently. "I'll figure it out with Isabel Louise."

"As much as anybody figures out anything with Isabel Louise," Elijah Wu said with a wry smile. "If it helps at all, she likes you."

"What?" I yelped. "That girl barely tolerates me."

"That's what liking looks like for her," he said. "For what it's worth, she's really lucky to have you as a cousin, even if it is removed. She's not very close to her parents, and you could be a positive role model for her."

"Thanks," I said, but I wasn't buying it. If I were going to be a role model for Isabel Louise, shouldn't I start out as smarter than her?

Plus I shouldn't keep getting tangled up with dead bodies.

And I should eat healthier.

And I should be less snarky.

I definitely was not qualified to be her role model.

I looked at Elijah Wu. “If I am related to Isabel Louise, are you available for adoption? I’m going to need you at every family event.”

“I’ll gladly be your honorary second cousin once removed.” He headed away from the booth, and then turned to call back to me. “As long as it doesn’t mean that I have to marry Isabel Louise to join your family.”

Now there was a thought to set my head spinning.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

My head was still spinning when Leah arrived. I looked at the soup and salad that arrived at the table and then promptly ordered some additional French fries. If Isabel Louise needed a nutritional role model, she'd have to find somebody other than me.

Maybe Leah. My father and I both considered Leah to be part of our family, so that meant she inherited Isabel Louise, too. I couldn't wait to tell her.

"So since I last talked to you, Ms. LeBon crashed into my car. She died, my car is totaled, and I ended up in the emergency room. Oh yeah, and she's my grandmother. And there might have been a bat person in the car with her who contributed in some way to the crash. Not sure about the last part. And since my father considers you to be his daughter, then Isabel Louise is your second cousin once removed."

I have to admit that I kind of enjoyed the stunned look on Leah's face. Her eyes were bugged out, and her mouth was hanging open.

“Rue,” she sputtered, “Forrest and I went out of town for one day, I repeat one day, to research some places where we might want to have our wedding, and this is what happens? Clearly I can’t let you out of my sight. Are you okay? What happened to your face?”

“Minor burns from the air bag,” I said, and then I took mercy on her and filled in some of the details so that the sequence of events, strange as they were, made a bit more sense.

“So Fee now owns Ms. LeBon’s house?”

I nodded.

“Wait,” Leah said. “When I parked in back of the diner, I swear I saw your car, but if its airbag deployed, I should have noticed some damage.”

“I replaced it this morning,” I said. “That’s Red Prius Two.”

Leah shook her head. “One day. I talked to you less than twenty-four hours ago, and everything was normal.” She smiled at me. “Well, as normal as your life ever gets.”

“Talk to me about wedding venues,” I said, suddenly overwhelmed with all of the craziness. I’d rather hear about the early stages of wedding insanity instead, although I had total faith that Leah would not become a Bridezilla. She was simply too level-headed and nice for that.

Besides, she had me as her maid of honor. What could possibly go wrong?

Leah caressed her engagement ring. “We’re not in a big hurry.”

“Life is perilous,” I said, suddenly serious. “If you want to marry the man, why wait?”

“I want to enjoy being engaged for a while first,” Leah said.

“So what’s to enjoy? You’ve got a pretty ring on your finger, and you said yes. Get on with it.”

“Rue, you need to slow down,” Leah said with a smile.

“You can pull off a birthday party in a few hours. You should be able to plan a wedding in a week or so,” I insisted.

“I could,” Leah admitted, “but that’s not what I want. I need to think things through and talk to Forrest about what he wants. All we know so far is that we want to keep it small and simple.”

Small. Simple. I liked those words. That definitely reduced the risk of having to wear a big, poofy dress.

“We want the day to be about us and the people we love,” Leah continued.

I had a sneaking suspicion that all weddings started that way but then grew into extravaganzas.

“Did you find any places you liked?”

“No,” Leah said. “They all seemed too big. They had huge spaces for holding a reception, and they didn’t seem warm or friendly.”

“Then I’ll help you keep looking,” I said. I was already doing a bad job of being a maid of honor, let alone a best friend, and I needed to step up.

“Actually,” Leah said, “there’s something I need to ask your father and you.”

“You want to get married in the diner?” I asked.

Wait. That wasn’t as ridiculous as it sounded. The guests could sit in the booths, and Forrest and Leah could walk down the center aisle. Add some flowers and music, and there you had it – instant wedding.

“Get married in the diner?” Leah asked, and her horrified look indicated that she wasn’t quite seeing the same image I was.

Darn. That would have been simple.

And friendly.

Easy clean up.

“Rue, seriously, there’s something I want to ask you and your father.”

“Well, you’re in luck, because my dad just walked in.” I watched his face light up when he saw Leah, and he immediately joined us.

“Leah has something to ask us,” I told him.

“Yes,” my father said with a smile.

“You haven’t even heard the question yet.” Leah’s face radiated love.

“Doesn’t really matter,” my father said.

Why did I think he wouldn’t say the same thing to me? I had to admit that it might be a big more dangerous to give me an unconditional yes.

“This is a big request, and I want you to be totally honest. I won’t be the least bit offended if you say no, and in fact, I’m not even sure I should ask you.”

“Leah, just spit it out.” This was Leah. How bad could it be – she wanted to use the diner’s kitchen to bake extra cupcakes?

“Would you consider letting me get married by your pond?”

I looked at my father, and both of our eyes simultaneously filled with tears. “Oh Leah,” my dad said, embracing her in a warm hug, “that would make me the happiest man on earth.”

“Rue?” Leah said. “I know how much you value your privacy there.”

“It would be perfect,” I said. “I’d even let you use my tower.”

“Maybe for pictures,” Leah said with a smile. She looked back at my father. “I promise I’ll keep it really small.”

“You have as many people as you want,” my father said. “We can pitch circus tents out there if you want them.”

“And elephants,” I said. “We’ll rent you elephants if you want them to go with the circus tents.” This might be a fun wedding after all.

“You two are the best,” Leah said, “but hold off on the circus tents and the elephants for now.”

“I don’t know,” I said, pondering. “Just think of the look on Forrest’s face if you made a grand entrance on the back of an elephant.”

Leah laughed. “As my maid of honor, if I come in on an elephant, you have to have your own elephant to ride.”

“Done.” I’d even tolerate a poofy dress if I got to ride an elephant.

Leah shook her head in amazement. "Here I am, envisioning a peaceful little wedding beside your pond, and suddenly elephants are involved. How did this happen?"

My father looked at me. "I call it the Rue effect."

"I can't wait to tell Forrest," Leah said, and she and my father got out of their side of the booth. "I think he'll love the idea."

"If he doesn't, send him my way," my father said with feigned ferocity.

"You might want to keep the elephant part as a surprise," I suggested.

"You think?" Leah asked. She and my father were both shaking their heads as they walked away from me.

Just as I got ready to follow them, I saw Ike come in the front door. He spotted me and walked somberly down the aisle to my booth. He plopped down a vase of mixed flowers straight from the grocery store, right down to the price sticker on the side of the vase.

"I heard about last night, and I wanted to tell you how sorry I am that happened to you," he said.

I pulled the flowers closer. Some of the daisies were a suspicious shade of neon purple. Dye? Paint? I was afraid to put my nose close to smell them.

"That's sweet of you, Ike," I said, silencing the critical voice in my head. It was the thought that counted, and the thought was nice.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

On what level was he asking that question? Physically? Emotionally?

I gave the answer that he wanted to hear, the same one I'd been giving everybody. "I'm okay." Then I figured I might as well ask. "Maria Theresa didn't get any security cameras for the front of her studio, did she?"

Ike settled in the booth opposite me. "Not yet. I know we're planning to, but she's been focused on getting the inside ready for classes."

Then I thought about what information he might be able to provide that would clear up one niggling question. "Did you go to the studio first thing this morning?"

"Yes," Ike said. "There was an early morning yoga class, and I unlocked the place for the instructor and got it set up."

Perfect. "Was there another one of those cards slipped under the door?"

"There was," Ike answered. "I knew how much it would upset Mary Terry when she got there, so I put it out of sight. I figured I'd give it directly to Archibald Zooper the next time I saw him."

"So it was addressed to him?"

Ike nodded. "Just like the last one that made Mary Terry start all that fuss."

"So Maria Theresa really hated Ms. LeBon, didn't she?"

I thought I could just slide that question right in there, all calm and cool, but Ike took note.

"Ms. LeBon crashed her car. Mary Terry didn't have a single thing to do with that."

Interesting the leap his mind took. What did I have to lose? The worst he could do was take back the flowers. "Was she home last night?"

"Sure. She and Jake and I watched some kids' movies to see if we could plan dance parties around them. That was a really good idea of yours, you know."

"Thanks," I said. "And then you went to bed?"

"I went to bed early, like ten o'clock, because I knew I had an early opening today."

"And Maria Theresa?"

"I didn't hear her, so I'm sure she went to bed soon after me."

Okay. An alibi, but not an airtight one.

I was trying to imagine Maria Theresa as the bat person.

It wasn't a certainty, but it was a possibility.

I could see that I was making Ike uncomfortable. "I'm sorry. I just have all of these crazy thoughts ever since last night. It really rattled me."

"What can I do to help?" Ike asked. "You want me to plan another movie night for you?"

"Not quite yet," I said. "I'm still having a lot of headaches."

I definitely wasn't up to Ike's singing. The mere thought of it made my head throb even worse.

"Let me know if there's anything I can do. Want me to drive you anywhere? Buy you groceries or something?"

He really was a sweet man.

“I replaced my car this morning, but thanks,” I said. “These flowers will cheer me up.”

“That’s exactly what I thought when I saw them – now there’s a cheerful bunch of flowers.”

I nodded and thanked him again as he left.

He definitely wasn’t going to be in charge of the flowers for Leah’s wedding, that’s for sure, but I wondered how he would look on an elephant.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“What were you thinking? You didn’t get me a root beer float from the diner? What kind of an assistant are you?” Maria Theresa had a full head of steam as she barreled into the diner. I was sorely tempted to tell her that the diner was closed and she’d have to live without her favorite concoction, but I knew how I would take it if someone deprived me of a Diet Coke when I wanted it, so I let her fling herself into a seat at the counter.

Besides, Ike was the recipient of her tirade, and I didn’t want to make matters worse for him. I picked up my vase of flowers and went to say hello to her.

“Where did you get those hideous flowers?” Maria Theresa asked.

Suddenly, they were the most beautiful bouquet in the world. “These? I asked. “They are the most cheerful, thoughtful, lovely flowers I have ever received. They were given to me by an extremely thoughtful person who knew I was going through a rough time.”

Maria Theresa snorted. "If those are the best flowers you've ever gotten, you've led a dismal life."

"I gave them to her," Ike said, sounding disappointed but a little defensive at the same time.

"You? Well, clearly I need to give you lessons on how to choose tasteful and appropriate flowers." This was from a woman whose idea of fashion included flowing black skirts and red ruffled blouses with plunging cleavage.

"He did great," I said, suddenly protective of Ike. Poor man – he'd probably never give a woman flowers again in his life.

Maria Theresa looked at me, and then I guess she noticed the burns on my face and the edges of bruises peeking out. "Oh."

Oh indeed.

"I'm sorry you got injured," Maria Theresa said, "but I'm not a hypocrite. It's not the way I was raised, and I pride myself on being honest. 'You want the truth? Just ask Maria Theresa.' That's what my family always said."

What was she talking about? "So you're actually not sorry that I got injured?"

"No, I'm sorry about that, but I'm not sorry that woman is dead."

Wow. That was cold. "I understand that you had issues with her."

"You can say that again. I tried with her, I actually did, and there was a point where I thought that once Archibald clearly made his choice of me over her, that we could co-exist peacefully. She even made mention that she had turned her attentions in another direction."

That other direction was my Uncle Goose, and that was never going to happen.

“She enjoyed male attention,” I said cautiously.

“She was unscrupulous,” Maria Theresa said firmly. “That’s the kindest word I can use for her. She was an unscrupulous woman who didn’t respect when a man is taken.”

So that’s how she viewed Archibald Zooper – as a taken man. Somehow I wasn’t sure that he would agree with that description.

I was getting tired of this. “Don’t you trust Archibald?”

“Trust a man? You poor, naïve, idiotic girl. Who trusts a man? I haven’t met a man yet who can’t be distracted by flattery and a flash of flesh.”

I wanted to defend men, but then I remembered that my long-time boyfriend, Jason, had been distracted by a woman named Angela Dominelli, who was quite the temptress. I had totally trusted Jason, and I had been wrong.

I looked at Ike, who was awkwardly shifting his weight from foot to foot. I didn’t imagine he was enjoying this character assassination of his entire gender.

“So you’re not sad that Ms. LeBon is dead?” I asked.

“As I said, I’m not a hypocrite. I mean, I’m not saying that I hope she burns in hell forever, but I’m not going to bring flowers to her funeral.” She pointed at my bouquet. “Not even ones like that.”

She needed to lay off my flowers. I hugged them to my chest a bit protectively. Poor little neon purple flowers. “So her death is a relief to you?”

“Yes, it is. I know I should say things like, ‘Oh, I’ll miss her vibrant personality,’ but I won’t.” She paused and looked up and to the right quizzically. “You know what? Her death is a relief. I can go to my dance studio in the morning and not be enraged to find more notes addressed to Archibald slipped under the door. I can look out the front window of my place of business and not have my day ruined by seeing her prance by. I can even walk in this diner without being afraid that I’m going to see Cecille and Archibald sharing a booth. I was beginning to be afraid that this town wasn’t big enough for both of us.” She took a deep breath and waved her hands around dramatically. “And now this is MY town, and it’s just the right size.”

I didn’t know how to tell Maria Theresa that Fool’s Hill would never be HER town. That took being born and raised here, and having generations of family here. Besides, this town already had a matriarch, and it wasn’t Maria Theresa.

It was Miss Henflinger.

And nobody was going to dethrone Miss Henflinger.

“Ms. LeBon was actually my grandmother,” I finally said, feeling the need to deflate Maria Theresa a bit.

She stared at me skeptically. “Are you sure about that?”

“Yes,” I said. “We have DNA results to prove it.”

“I don’t understand you people,” Maria Theresa said, looking at me like I was a separate species. “In New York, where I’m from, we know who our family members are. We might not like all of them, and we may fight with them and disown them, but we know who they are.”

“Life gets complicated sometimes,” I said, feeling my anger grow over her “you people” comment. Besides, what sense did that make? Hadn’t she just said that this was HER town, and if so, then weren’t we HER people? “Sometimes you don’t know what you don’t know.”

I took a deep breath so that I could decide whether or not I wanted to say what was ready to come out of my mouth, which was, “Such as the fact that Archibald Zooper has a huge crush on Fee, who, by the way, happens to be my mother.”

Fortunately, Maria Theresa’s root beer float arrived and she got up and prepared to make a grand exit.

Besides, I had something more important to say to her. “You might expect a visit from Detective Haverton.”

That stopped her in her tracks. “What would a detective want with me?”

“He’ll be investigating Ms. LeBon’s death,” I said smugly, “and since you had a clear animosity for the victim, I’m sure he’ll want to speak with you.”

“Victim? That woman wasn’t a victim. She crashed her own car.”

“There’s a possibility that there could have been other factors,” I said. I wanted to gloat that I knew more than she did, but I knew it would be wrong to reveal too much.

“What factors?” Maria Theresa asked, and I scrutinized her face. Was there guilt there? Fear? A bat-like flutter?

“I’m sure Detective Haverton will see what information you might have to provide.”

“Me? I was home in bed. I have no information for any detective.” She whirled on Ike. “Tell her. I was home all night.”

Hmm. So she was trotting out her alibi.

She glared at Ike. “Tell her I was home.”

He looked at me miserably. “To the best of my knowledge, she was home.”

“To the best of your knowledge?” Maria Theresa shrieked. “To the best of your knowledge? What do you mean by that? Do you think I snuck out in the middle of the night and somehow made that woman crash her car? Is that what you actually think of me? If that’s the case, you’re fired. You can go back to your momma in New York and find yourself some miserable job in the city and live in a roach-infested room. I give you opportunities and a house to live in and a chance to make something of yourself, and this is the gratitude I get?”

Maria Theresa’s face resembled a vine-ripened late summer tomato, and Ike looked as pale as a polar bear.

“None of this is Ike’s fault,” I said, cutting through her wrath. “Besides, without him, you can’t do any of the dance parties or Steps for Success events. Those have the potential to be major sources of income, and they rely on his personality. Your business is going to fail if you fire Ike.”

She stopped hyperventilating, and the red began to slowly ebb. “We’ll talk about this, Ike.”

She grabbed the container holding her root beer float and shoved it at him. “Here. Carry this.”

She led the way out of the diner, and Ike stopped beside me before he hurried after her. "Thank you," he whispered. Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out an envelope. "Could you possibly take care of this for me?"

I balanced the vase with one hand and took the envelope before Ike bolted for the door.

I was now holding an envelope addressed to Archibald Zooper.

Chapter Thirty

What to do?

Every fiber of my being wanted to open the envelope I was holding. I wanted to see what was in Ms. LeBon's latest – last – missive. Maybe it had some kind of hint that would help me identify the bat person. Maybe it would give me some insight into the grandmother I would never get to know better.

The rational part of my brain said to call Detective Haverton and hand it over to him. If he ended up investigating Ms. LeBon's death as a potential homicide, then the note could be a piece of evidence that I should give him. If nothing else, its existence explained why Ms. LeBon had been on Main Street at midnight – secret missive delivery. Why she couldn't simply use the U.S. postal system was another question that would remain unanswered.

Actually, I knew the answer. Her motive wasn't simply to communicate with Archibald Zooper. There were many easier ways to do that – like call him. More than that, her goal was to unsettle Maria Theresa. She wanted to plant that seed of doubt in the other woman's mind that she was a threat to her relationship with

Archibald Zooper. That wasn't a kind thing to do, but it seemed to have entertainment value for Ms. LeBon.

Either that, or it was a way to protect her ego from the fact that Archibald Zooper had, in fact, chosen Maria Theresa over her.

I hoped that a day was coming when women didn't find themselves turned into mortal enemies in quest of the same man, but given the number of girl fights I saw at school, I didn't think that was likely to happen soon.

I looked at the letter I was clutching. I now knew what I really wanted to do: deliver it to Archibald Zooper. Then I would be honoring Ike's request, and I also knew I could get him to let me read it. That was a win-win situation for me.

I looked at the letter again. Darn. My fingerprints were now all over it, if that ever became an issue.

Why was it rarely fun to do the right thing? I put my flowers on the counter and pulled out my phone. For once, my call to Detective Haverton went to voice mail, and I explained that I had the note that had been slipped under the dance studio door.

Was that really only last night? So much had happened in less than twenty-four hours that I felt like I was in a time warp.

I went into the back and got a plastic bag since it seemed like I should protect the note, even though I had definitely contaminated it. What was I supposed to do when Ike handed it to me – pull out the gloves I never carried with me? I was a high school English teacher and a diner co-owner; neither role prepared me to collect forensic evidence.

I'd be sure to tell Detective Haverton exactly that if he gave me any grief.

As much as I wanted to simply go home and crawl into bed, I knew that I had yet more tasks ahead. I pulled out my phone and texted Ike: Is Archibald Zooper at the studio?

He quickly responded: no.

Although there were many places he could be, I decided to take a chance and go to the townhouse he was renting from my father and me. It had belonged to my ex-boyfriend who, despite dumping me, had left everything he owned to my father and me.

I had been as gobsmacked as Fee was about inheriting everything that Ms. LeBon possessed.

I pulled up in front of the townhouse, which had a weird accumulation of memories for me, and knocked on the front door. Sure enough, Archibald Zooper answered.

"Rue!" His voice contained equal amounts of surprise and delight. "Come in. Not that I have to invite you in because, after all, you are the owner of this place. There isn't a problem, is there? I promise I have been taking very good care of your property."

"There is no problem with the townhouse, but there is another issue. I don't know if you've already heard the news from Maria Theresa."

"I have to admit that I needed a break today," he said, looking a bit abashed. "Maria Theresa is a lot."

I could understand that.

“She’s called me about twenty times, but I silenced my phone. I just wanted a day to reflect and recover.”

I wasn’t sure that it was a good sign for a relationship that one of the partners needed to reflect and recover, but I wasn’t an expert on these things.

“I’m sorry to interrupt your peaceful day, but there’s something you need to know,” I told him.

“You’re not disturbing me,” he said. “You’re nothing like Maria Theresa. I don’t find it exhausting to be around you.”

I guessed that was a compliment. I took a deep breath and spilled out the story of Ms. LeBon’s accident and resulting death. The whole time I was watching his face, trying to see if he was reacting as if he already knew or if I could see any guilt there. After all, Archibald Zooper had made it onto the suspects list.

By the time I finished the saga, tears were streaming down the man’s face. I put my arms around him and patted his back.

“I can’t believe she’s dead,” Archibald Zooper said. “She always seemed so . . . alive.”

Well, that was one way to look at it.

“I will forever be grateful to Cecille,” he said, stepping back and sitting down on a chair in the living room. I sat on the sofa, continuing to study him. “She’s the reason I came to Fool’s Hill, which is the only reason I met you and your father and Leah and Elijah Wu and Fee and all of these other wonderful people.”

That was a nice list, and I was glad to be on it.

“And she had many good qualities that I truly appreciated.”

I couldn't help myself. "What did you see in her?"

Archibald Zooper had stopped crying, and he managed a shadow of a smile. "She was never boring."

Heavens. That was exactly what Detective Haverton said about me. Were there traits that Ms. LeBon and I had in common after all?

"She also spoke her mind, and I respected that. I always knew where I stood with Cecille. I knew when she approved of something I had done, and I certainly knew when she disapproved."

The similarities kept building since I was also known for my lack of tact at times.

"What bothered you about her?" I had to ask. After all, he had chosen Maria Theresa over her.

"It wasn't a deficit in Cecille," Archibald rushed to say, "but rather a history that I had with Maria Theresa. Plus, there was always the tango."

There definitely was the tango. The way they danced together should have been an Olympic sport.

"So it concerned you that Ms. LeBon was upsetting Maria Theresa?" I asked.

He looked at me just a little bit askance. "I wouldn't say it upset me. I viewed it as unnecessary. Cecille is a woman of quality, of bearing, and I considered it below her dignity to annoy Maria Theresa."

"She told Maria Theresa that she could have you back at the snap of her fingers," I added. "Was that true?"

“I have given up trying to predict the course of the heart,” Archibald Zooper said with a dramatic sigh. “Just when I think the path is clear, along comes an unexpected fork in the road. I find it very difficult to say no to a woman, but I also know that incessant drama is not healthy for anybody involved.”

He was right on that front. It certainly hadn’t been healthy for Ms. LeBon. The question was, did Archibald Zooper have anything to do with ending the drama?

“So you thought that you had charted a path forward with Ms. LeBon, and then Maria Theresa reappeared in your life,” I said, leading him on.

“That occurred,” Archibald Zooper said. “Nobody was more surprised than I was that Maria Theresa found me here, let alone that she followed me and established a life here.”

“Even to the extent of opening a business and planning to buy a house,” I added just for emphasis. After Aunt Deary had died, Uncle Goose had not been happy living in the house they had shared, and we had converted the second floor of his hardware store into a cozy living space that suited him perfectly. Maria Theresa was renting his former house until the legalities were finished to allow her to purchase it.

“Again, I was startled, but I am pleased for her. I’m not sure that New York was a healthy or happy place for her, with her husband in jail and his family and associates always intruding in her life.”

I guess that was what happened when one’s husband was a Mafia something-or-other and ended up at Ryker’s Island. I can’t say I blamed Maria Theresa for wanting to escape from her previous environs.

Then I took the big leap. “But now your attention has been attracted by yet another woman?”

Archibald Zooper’s voice was pleading when he spoke. “Please don’t consider me a fickle cad who merrily leaps from woman to woman. I don’t want you to think badly of me.”

The image of Archibald Zooper merrily leaping was generating mental gymnastics on my part. I found it humorous to think of the rotund, short man leaping, merrily or not.

Did that mean I could not see him being the bat person who had gotten out of the moving car and had appeared to float? Archibald Zooper seemed rather low to the ground to swoop, let alone carry off clothing that seemed to flow.

I was now about ninety-five percent certain that Archibald Zooper was not the bat person.

“So you are still interested in Fee?” I asked, yanking my mind back to the ongoing conversation.

When Detective Haverton was questioning somebody, I bet his mind did not go zigging and sagging around as much as mine did.

Archibald Zooper looked at me cautiously. “Are we speaking confidentially?”

“As in ‘don’t tell Maria Theresa?’ confidentially?”

“Exactly,” he said. “You are a very perceptive woman, Rue.”

“I have absolutely no desire to pass along any information to Maria Theresa, especially anything that might upset her,” I assured him. I didn’t want yet more of her scenes in the diner.

“I know that this is awkward for you since Fee is your mother,” he said, lowering his eyes.

“We don’t have the typical mother/daughter relationship,” I reminded him.

“I appreciate that, but I don’t want to complicate your family any further,” he said.

Suddenly I had a feeling that Archibald Zooper’s ego was a bit beyond healthy, verging on excessive. Or maybe delusional. Did he believe that Fee was his for the taking? I hated to tell him, but right now he was no more than one of a plethora of customers she had waited on at the diner.

“I don’t think it’s at the complicated stage yet,” I said. I wasn’t sure if he picked up on the fact that I was holding back a snicker.

“Oh, I am fully aware of that,” Archibald rushed to say. “It’s simply that I find her refreshing.”

Refreshing? That was an interesting word.

“The women with whom I’ve been dealing are, shall we say, intense.”

Yep, go right ahead and say that. He’d get no argument from me.

“Fee seems like a ray of sunlight,” Archibald continued. “She smiles, she’s helpful, and she practically reads minds.”

“She’s a good waitress.” I couldn’t prevent those words from coming out of my mouth. I mean, really, Archibald. That’s the way a good waitress acts in order to get better tips. It’s her job.

“That she is, but I sense so much more in her. I feel a simple goodness radiating out from her.”

“Archibald, this is the woman who abandoned me and my father and stayed away for thirty-four years.” I couldn’t help but add those significant little facts into the equation.

“There is that,” he sighed. “There is also that fact that she doesn’t know my name or my personality or my interests. She simply knows that I like my coffee with two creams and three sugars and that I prefer onion rings over French fries.”

“Well, you have to start somewhere.”

“So you think I have a chance with Fee?” Archibald said eagerly.

“That is not what I meant.” My retort was quick and sharp. Then I looked at his eyes and softened my stance. “Stranger things have happened. I’d give her some space now since she just lost her best friend, who, if you didn’t hear, was also her mother.”

“Cecille was Fee’s mother?” Archibald asked, clasping both hands over his mouth.

I guess he hadn’t heard.

“How did that happen?”

That was a question I didn’t want to answer on many levels. “That’s a story for another day,” I said. “I’m exhausted, and I need to go home. I just wanted to tell you the news about Ms. LeBon in person.”

“I could end up dating both a mother and her daughter?” Archibald Zooper muttered, more to himself than to me. I couldn’t tell if he was horrified or titillated by the thought.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, Archibald,” I warned him.

“You’re right, Rue. You are absolutely right. I am an insensitive male to be talking about this with you, especially when tragedy so recently visited you.”

Visited me? It plowed right into the front of my car.

My ex-car.

“Take care of yourself,” I said. “I’m sorry to have interrupted your reflection and recovery.”

“I have even more reflecting to do now,” he said, walking to the door with me. “Goodbye, lovely and considerate Miss Rue.”

Oh no. No, no, no. He wasn’t going to flirt with a third generation, was he? That was just wrong.

He was just being gentlemanly and courtly in an old-fashioned way, I decided as I drove away.

If he ever told me I was a ray of sunlight, though, he was in deep trouble.

Chapter Thirty-One

This day needed to be over. Every inch of my body ached, and I was emotionally exhausted as well. Before I headed for my bed, however, I needed to retrieve Caterina from Miss Henflinger. I might be about ready to forget my own name, but I was not going to forget my cat.

“Did she behave?” I asked Miss Henflinger.

“She was perfect,” Miss Henflinger said, “as I would have expected from her.”

I did not expect perfection from myself, so I certainly did not expect it from my cat. Good thing, too, since she had sprees where she was a hellcat. She would deliberately knock things over – plants, cups, anything light enough for her paws to budge. What made it worse was that she would stare at me right before something was destined for the floor as if she were daring me to stop her. Needless to say, her paw was faster than my dash across the room.

Still, despite the money I spent replacing things she broke, I had to admire her. In Caterina’s view of the world, everything was a toy and had unlimited

entertainment value. As near as I could tell, she was either sleeping or amused, which was not a bad way to live.

“How did she do with Henry?” I asked.

“She kept him in line,” Miss Henflinger said, which I found alarming.

“How did she do that?”

“She took custody of my lap,” Miss Henflinger said. “Very effective strategy. Henry knows better than to try anything when she is in my proximity.” Miss Henflinger got a trace of a smile. “Besides, I always find that Henry is more affectionate after Caterina has been here. He has little interest in my lap until it has been unavailable to him.”

“I’m glad that Caterina can be of help.”

“She is a helpful cat in a variety of ways,” Miss Henflinger replied, and she left it at that.

I gave her a quick recap of my talk with Elijah Wu and his analysis of the security footage, my run-in with Maria Theresa and my possession of Ms. LeBon’s missive, and my conversation with Archibald Zooper.”

“You have been quite busy,” Miss Henflinger said, which was as close as she would come to praising me for my diligence. She turned her attention to the whiteboard, which was still in her kitchen. “Is there anything we should be adding?” “The only change I would make would be to take Archibald Zooper off since I simply can’t see him moving like the bat person.”

“I would believe that except for his tango ability,” Miss Henflinger said. “That is a very athletic dance, and he is a master of it.”

“You are absolutely right,” I said. “I stand corrected. I was thinking he couldn’t move the way the bat person moved, but he can certainly glide on the dance floor. My sense was also that he was genuinely surprised and upset by the news of Ms. LeBon’s death.”

“Appearances can be deceiving,” Miss Henflinger said shortly.

“Yes, they can.” My exhaustion was threatening to make me curl up on Miss Henflinger’s kitchen floor and fall asleep. I needed to leave while it was still safe for me to drive.

“Thank you for keeping Caterina for me,” I said.

“Caterina is always welcome here,” she replied.

I wondered if the same thing applied to me, but I was too tired to pursue the thought. I gathered my cat and drove home. I wasn’t enjoying my new car in the least, but at least I seemed capable of driving without having a panic attack, so that would have to do for now.

I fed Caterina, which was redundant since I was sure she had eaten at Miss Henflinger’s. I could hear my father’s and Fee’s voices coming from the living room, but I was too tired to join them. I slinked off to my bedroom, finding it essential to crawl into bed. Just as I settled into my beloved mattress, though, I stretched to reach for my phone.

There was one more task I had to complete in this infernally long day. The mere thought of having yet one more conversation made me want to cry, but I knew I would not have any shred of peace of mind until I did it.

“Isabel Louise?” I said when the girl answered. “It’s Rue.”

"I realize that," she snapped.

I settled back against the pillows, trying to find a comfortable position. "Is your mother available?"

"Why would you ask that?"

"I have news that involves your family, and I thought that perhaps I should talk to her."

"Just talk to me," Isabel Louise snapped. "My mother is not available."

"Your father?" I tried. Isabel Louise was so intellectually intelligent that I sometimes forgot how young she was. Her emotional intelligence was still a work in progress.

"My parents are at a conference in California," Isabel Louise said.

"So you're alone."

"So what? Do you think I need a babysitter?"

It wasn't relevant to my reason for calling, but I couldn't resist asking. "Are you going to live on campus?"

"Yes," she said. "Why? Don't you approve of that, either?"

"Have you met your roommate yet?"

"No. She sent me some stupid text about coordinating our bedspreads, as if that matters."

"Did you tell her that coordinating bedspreads isn't of interest to you?"

"I didn't answer," Isabel Louise snapped.

"You know, I'd be happy to take you school shopping. It could be fun to pick out what you need to take to college."

Right. I'd have to get Leah to go with us. I'd commuted from home to the University of Delaware, and I had absolutely no idea what she would need, other than, apparently, a bedspread. More than that, though, I felt sorry for her roommate. She had absolutely no idea what was ahead of her. She was most likely a naïve and optimistic college freshman, thinking that her roommate would become her new best friend.

If I were a better, I'd put money on the chances of Isabel Louise being in a single room before the first month was up.

Then I reconsidered. Isabel Louise would only need a week to send her roommate flying to the powers-that-be begging them to get rid of Isabel Louise.

Maybe a day.

"What?" Isabel Louise was snapping. "You want to take me shopping? Are you out of your mind?"

"It was simply an offer," I said, keeping my temper only because I knew I had more information to deliver.

"Thank you, I suppose," Isabel Louise said, but it was far more a question than a statement.

"Isabel Louise, I have bad news about your great-great-aunt Cecille," I said. I wasn't sure it was a good idea to tell her this without the support of her parents around her, but I feared that word would get to her through some other means.

"She's dead," Isabel Louise said.

Okay then. So much for trying to break the news gently.

"I'm sorry," I said.

“She was annoying,” Isabel Louise said. “Be honest. You know she was.”

“She had good qualities as well,” I said. “Did Elijah Wu tell you?”

“No,” she said. “I have other sources.”

I didn’t even what to know what those were.

“Did you also know that Ms. LeBon was Fee’s mother and my grandmother?”

There was a moment’s silence. “So you and I are related?”

“Near as I can tell, I’m your second cousin once removed,” I said. I wished I were telling her the news in person so I could see her expression.

“I’m not used to having much of a family,” she finally said. “Am I supposed to say something to you like ‘Welcome to the clan?’”

“Not necessary,” I said. Then, just to mess with her, I added, “Just think – you now have me and Fee and my father and Uncle Goose and Caterina – you’d better start your Christmas shopping early this year.”

“Whee,” Isabel Louise said, her voice not just dripping but pouring with sarcasm.

I wondered if she knew she was channeling Henry.

