



EMERSON AND QUIG: BOOK ONE

# ASSUMPTIONS

C.E. PIETROWIAK

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By  
C.E. Pietrowiak

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The decorative font is **Immortal** by Apostrophic Labs.  
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*To my family and friends  
and to all the perfect strangers  
who inspired these words.*





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## CHAPTER ONE

# IN THE SILENCE

The stars burned bright the night William Emerson died. But for him, at that moment, there was only darkness.

“Sixteen forever,” he said. His lips formed no words.

He heard his mother cry. He could not open his eyes to see her.

Then there was silence. No more crying. No more breathing.

The cold crept over him and he wondered if it was the same for everyone or if it was peculiar to winter. It was, after all, December in Chicago.

It had been seven months since his last confession, but he prayed every day, more than once. He had asked for strength and sometimes for patience, but mostly he prayed about death. So that is what he did when his body lay motionless, sprawled over the stone steps in front of the altar at St. Ita Catholic Church, the power of God now lost to him. Forever.



## CHAPTER TWO

### PROVIDENT SIX MONTHS PRIOR

The smell of mud and damp plaster hung thick over the deserted one-lane road. Timothy Stillman wiped his forehead, the sweat already beading in the sultry morning. He ran his fingers through his hair, which had become increasingly more salt than pepper since he left Chicago for this most recent assignment downstate.

Stillman leaned heavily against his rusted pickup truck, mobile phone pressed to his ear. "She's dead."

"Did you get it?" asked a cold voice on the other end.

"Yes . . . Yes. I have it. She never knew it was gone." Stillman rubbed at the sting in his sleep-deprived eyes. "It doesn't matter now."

"Contact me when you get back to the city. We'll make arrangements." The call ended with an abrupt click. Stillman jammed his phone into the back pocket of his grungy jeans.

A radio announcer broadcasting from the next county read with half-concerned curiosity, like a gaper safely passing a ten-car pileup on the opposite side of the road. "Yesterday evening, nearby Provident was struck

by a series of devastating microbursts. Several shops and homes were damaged in a stormy path of destruction. The number of casualties is not yet known. Keep listening for further details.”

The news looped in Stillman’s head.

*Keep listening for further details . . .*

*Keep listening . . .*

*Keep listening while you describe the café tables flattened by what used to be the front wall of the diner. Keep listening while you tell us about the barn roof, ripped off whole, found upside down miles from the farm it once served. Keep listening while you tally the dead . . . while you tally the dead . . .*

Butter-yellow siding lay in splinters, scattered across a shimmery cornfield a hundred feet beyond the exposed foundation walls of a once quaint farmhouse. In the front yard a battered chicken-shaped sign advertising “Fresh Brown Eggs for Sale” dangled from its wood post by one loose screw.

Stillman plodded down the road. He stopped near a small pile of debris and squatted to study the jumbled collection. He picked aimlessly at the remains – a tea kettle with no handle, a dented can of tuna. Under the leg of a dining room table he found a bible, its maroon cover fraying at the corners. A slender sky-blue ribbon still held its place. Stillman read, “Anyone who is trustworthy in little things is trustworthy in great; anyone who is dishonest in little things is dishonest in great. Luke 16:10.”

He flipped to the front. The bookplate was neatly inscribed, "This book belongs to Miss Dorothea Whitford." Stillman let the book drop from his hands. It fell open on top of the rubble, its pages fluttering in the light breeze.

He scanned the destruction then covered his mouth with both hands and bolted to the roadside ditch. He doubled over and threw up, retching until there was nothing left.

Hunched, hands on his knees, he breathed deliberately. After several minutes he straightened himself and collected the bible. He walked back to his truck. The driver's door creaked when he pulled it open. He tossed the worn book onto the passenger seat, slipped behind the wheel, and drove away from the farmhouse without looking back.





## CHAPTER THREE

# ALL HALLOWS EVE

William Emerson stood alone at the center of a small church courtyard, backpack at his feet. Somber morning clouds hung low over the Chicago lakefront, echoing the bluestone pavers, coarse and intractable beneath his sneakers. He closed the collar of his coat against the chill.

Untamed boxwoods hugged the wrought iron perimeter fence, forming a lush backdrop for the diminutive statue of a young woman, Ita, to whom the parish had been dedicated more than a century earlier. The Irish saint, dead nearly sixteen hundred years, stood atop a waist-high pedestal. Her lifelike gaze tenderly graced the lanky, dark-haired boy before her.

Will fell to his knees and crossed himself, “In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” Hands raised palms up, eyes fixed on Ita’s face above, he prayed in silence, lingering in the stillness of her expression.

He crossed himself again, rose, and brushed the dust off the faded knees of his jeans. He snapped up his backpack and jogged to the top of the stairs where he

passed through a nondescript door into the soothing darkness of the church.

The unnatural flicker of electric votives washed up against the sidewall of the towering space. The parishioner's door of the confessional stood ajar, as it had for weeks. More often than not, the sacrament took place in the pastor's office where, though the door was closed, passersby always had to make a conscious effort to avoid overhearing the indiscretions of the less than devout.

At the heart of the sanctuary rested a small gilded cube flanked by a band of eight bas relief angels carved into the white stone of the high altar. Will walked down the side aisle, genuflected, and slid into the empty pew below Ita's window, her beautiful face framed by the hood of her simple gray cloak.

Will folded back the sleeves of his coat, swung the kneeler down, and lowered himself, pushing his wrists hard onto the top of the pew in front of him. The edge dug into his flesh, a reminder that, for now, he remained earthbound, physical. He closed his eyes and breathed in the faint sweetness of incense.

Somewhere in the dark behind him an old woman chanted a Litany of Saints, "St. Raphael . . . Pray for us . . . All the holy Angels and Archangels. . . "

"Pray for us . . ." Will sang to himself with each of her petitions.

The swish of robes broke his soft rhythm. He crossed himself and eased back onto the rigid pew.

"So sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt," said a smallish man. He came closer so as not to shout. The

man smoothed his mousy hair which receded slightly above the temples. A vertical crease at the inside corner of his brow imparted a profound gravity upon his face.

He smiled down at Will. The crinkles around his wistful gray-blue eyes and the dimples at his cheeks softened his expression, revealing an austere charm.

"May I?" The man motioned toward the empty space at the end of the pew.

"Professor Barrett, uh, sure."

In a single seamless motion he gathered up his robes and sat. "Professor'," he said, shaking his head. "I still haven't gotten used to that. A little formal at Eastview, aren't they?"

Will shrugged.

"Anyhow, I'm just an adjunct. My side job," said Barrett. "And how are you this morning, young man?"

"Okay," mumbled Will. "You're deacon?"

"Yes, though I'm not sure why they need me on a Friday. Small gathering."

"Seems like it."

"Maybe we'll have more tomorrow for All Saints. Saturday is tough, though. No obligation." Barrett smiled softly. "How is your father?"

"He's fine." Will paused. "I guess." He paused again. "I don't really see him much lately. He just works . . . and he sleeps a lot and . . . works . . ." his voice trailed off. Will turned his attention to the altar server lighting candles at the sanctuary.

"The loss of your mother must be affecting both of you profoundly." The altar server lit the last of the

candles. "Something like that just doesn't go away, Will. You know you can talk with me anytime, even at school. My office door is always open."

"Yeah. I know." Will smiled weakly. "Thanks."

Barrett looked toward the altar. "I should prepare." He squeezed Will's shoulder then slipped out of the pew. He walked to the front of the church, quietly greeting a few parishioners as he passed. Facing the altar, he bowed his head then shuffled up the steps and disappeared through a side opening.

Will settled back into his hard seat. He pulled the missalette from the slot at his knees and skipped ahead to the day's first reading.

*Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted . . .*

He closed the book and set it on the pew beside him.

A trio of altar servers carried the processional cross and the newly lit candles to the back of the church. Barrett re-entered the sanctuary, the green stole of Ordinary Time across his chest and an imposing gold plated book nestled in the crook of his arm. The priest joined him. The pair drifted along the side aisle and huddled with the servers. The cantor began to sing. The servers processed down the aisle. Barrett centered himself behind the cross. He raised the Gospel high above his head and marched toward the altar to celebrate Mass.

The service ran longer than usual. Will sprinted down sidewalk past the morning commuters toward the

Bryn Mawr el stop. In the distance three sets of discordant church bells rang out the hour . . . *just like they had before . . . last August in Jerusalem . . .*

Will handed his mother a stack of neatly folded khaki shorts, t-shirts, and a couple of salt stained bandanas, all of it finally clean after a full month away from the grit and sweat of the dig where he spent his summer rising before dawn to haul buckets of dirt and scrub bits of pottery for his archaeologist parents.

Safa Emerson squeezed the bundle into an already fat duffel bag, squashing down the edge of the sagging bed.

“Is that all of it?” she asked her son.

“That’s all of my stuff. My room is clear. Don’t know about Dad. He’s always stashing bits of junk everywhere.”

“That’s no way to talk about your father.”

Will’s brows knitted together. His mother giggled. She ran her fingertips down her son’s cheek and looked into his deep brown eyes, same color as her own. “I can’t believe how much you’ve grown.”

Will grimaced. “You say that every summer.”

“Well, it’s true, isn’t it? Yes. This time it’s definitely true. Look at you. You’re a full head taller than I am. How is that possible? You’ve turned into a young man right before my eyes.” She tiptoed to peck his cheek then returned to her frenetic search. Her black hair swept wildly across her shoulders as she flew around the hotel room double checking dressers, nightstands, under

the bed, for whatever they may have inadvertently tucked away over the weeks.

She let out a self-congratulatory sigh. "Well, I can't find anything else." She zipped the bag and heaved it on top of three others stacked near the door. "Help me carry these down to the desk. They'll be wanting us out soon." She checked the clock on the nightstand. "It's almost eleven. We better get going."

Will lugged two bulging duffel bags out of the room and deposited them with a porter at the front desk. His mother followed with the two remaining shoulder bags. She wore a pale gold scarf tied around her waist. She dropped the bags next to the others. "There. We'll pick them up when it's time to leave. Your father is at the Albright wrapping up a few things. He'll meet us here around one. He has our tickets. We don't have to be on the sherut to Ben Gurion until two. I still want to get to the souk one last time. I'm famished. Falafel? Shops should all be open by now."

"Sure." Will grinned wide.

"What? Oh, sorry. Thinking out loud again, am I?"

"At record speed, I think."

His mother elbowed him in the ribs.

She covered her hair loosely with the scarf and they headed out of the hotel lobby, walking along King David Street in the already intense heat. In the distance, church bells chimed the hour.

They skirted along the wall of the Old City to Damascus Gate where they passed through the deep rampart into the mouth of the souk, humming with

shoppers and gape-mouthed tourists and sandal-clad students on holiday.

Will and his mother weaved through the Arab Quarter along cobblestone streets worn smooth by centuries of foot traffic. They passed stalls blaring Arab pop and walls full of leather shoes, stacks of dusty carpets and spice shops with bins overflowing with pungent gold powders and leafy greens, finally stopping at a hole-in-the-wall no one in the States would confuse with a restaurant. Will's mother squeezed through the narrow doorway. A few minutes later she came out carrying two falafel sandwiches, tahini oozing over the top of the pita. They ate standing until the lone cafe table freed up. They sat and shared the rest of their meal in easy silence.

Church bells rang. Will's mother pushed back her chair. "Oh no, noon already?" She stood and adjusted her scarf. "I have a shopkeeper to see. I won't be long. Can you head back to the hotel in case your father is early?"

"Can't I come with you?" Will stuffed the last bite of pita into his mouth.

"Sorry, Habibi. Not today."

Will's face dropped. His mother brushed a stray lock of hair away from his eyes. "You need a haircut." She beamed at him, then, without another word, left him to his chewing. He swallowed hard.

"See you," he called after her as she vanished into the convoluted streets of the Old City.

Will wiped his mouth with a scratchy napkin, cleaned up their crumbs, and walked west toward Jaffa

Gate, the Old City's exit nearest their hotel. He wandered along the Via Dolorosa past shops selling rough-hewn olive wood crosses and antiqued icons of the Virgin cradling her holy child. He ducked down a narrow alley, pausing at the courtyard of the Church of Holy Sepulchre. A woman holding a red plastic carnation above her head pointed out the immovable ladder to a group of camera wielding seniors. Will crossed himself nonchalantly and continued on his way.

He rounded a corner into Butcher's Alley, dodging plump women going about their daily shopping, careful to step over the rivulets of bloody runoff in the street. Will inhaled the earthiness of the freshly dead. In one of the shops, a boy struggled to unhook a goat, skinned and hung eye-level by its white-pink ankles. "Yella!" the butcher shouted, hurrying the boy along.

The street spilled out into a sunny courtyard at the foot of the Citadel near Jaffa Gate. A pair of white-bearded men sat together at a table outside of a sweet shop, talking with their hands and sipping Arab coffee from tiny cups. The man in the shop slid a fresh tray of pastries into the bakery case. Will went inside.

He pointed at the glazed triangles, golden and shiny. The man handed him a piece of baklava. "Shukran," said Will, thanking the man in one of the few Arabic words he knew. His mother had probably been right when she told him he should have learned to speak the language, but what little he understood kept him out of trouble and his belly full and that was all he really needed.



Will handed the man some coins and stepped out onto the street. He devoured his sweet in two bites and sucked the honey off his fingers. He watched the chatting men for a moment. He sighed and walked through Jaffa Gate back into the world beyond the walls.

Will greeted his father in the hotel lobby. He had arrived early, just as his mother anticipated. William Emerson, Sr. was tall, but otherwise looked nothing like his son. Clad in khaki head to toe, his hair and eyes were fair and his features unremarkable. Except for his grubby fedora, which would be put away when they arrived home, he could be anyone born and bred in the heartland of America.

They sat in the lobby, lounging in deep leather chairs, comparing the newest scars on their knuckles. They sipped icy Cokes and re-lived the high points of the dig just ended.

“I’m looking forward to being home,” Emerson Sr. confided.

“Me, too.” Will ran his fingertips along the supple arm of the chair and sipped his cold drink.

Two o’clock. Safa Emerson did not return.

The sherut came and went. The authorities came and stayed.

They listened to Will recount every minute of his day. He told them about the packing, about the souk, the tahini, and about the shopkeeper his mother had mentioned. They showed him the gold scarf, dirty and torn, stuffed into a too small plastic zipper bag.

“Are you sure your mother didn’t tell you the name of the shop? What about the street?” the authorities prodded.

“I’m sure. I wanted to go with her. She wouldn’t let me,” Will insisted over and over. “I wanted to go.”

The hotel staff took the duffel bags back to the room his mother had cleared that morning. Clean towels had been stacked on the corner of the freshly made bed and a rollaway wheeled in, still folded up near the door. Will and his father stayed two weeks longer. Will repeated his story to the authorities, to his grandparents in Florida by phone in the middle of the night, but most of all to his father, until their flight landed at O’Hare and not another word was said.

The shrill whistle of an overdue train urged would-be passengers away from the tracks as it sped past the station, making it clear the wait would not be short. Will pushed through the stiff turnstile at the el station and climbed the stairs to the overcrowded platform above, thick with grumbling passengers pulling out phones and checking the time. Will weaved through the disgruntled to the end of the platform to where, he estimated, the leading car’s doors would open. He settled among the waiting.

Slowly, Will lifted one foot then the other, gauging the stickiness, filling a few minutes idly guessing the substance that might have spilled, trying not to think too far beyond mocha or cola.

Will searched the annoyed faces around him. Three black overcoats and a Northwestern sweatshirt away, he found her. A middle-aged woman stood at the edge of the platform. She didn't check her email or fuss with her designer coat. Her arms were tightly crossed, fingernails digging into her sleeves. She stared at the brick building at the far side of the tracks. Tears dribbled over her face, washing thin stripes of perfect makeup down her cheeks. A stray drop fell onto the dry wood of the platform where it disappeared into the grime. The overcoats and sweatshirt paid no attention.

Will warmed his hands in his coat pockets. A couple yards down, a fat man pressed his lips together so hard they vanished, his mouth a numb line. Two more overcoats down, a college kid, brows furrowed, counted nervously on his fingers.

Will studied these faces, witness to the glazed stares and the little shudders, witness to the sorrow and the guilt and the anger.

The train arrived with a whoosh. A man's recorded voice confidently announced, "This is Bryn Mawr. Next stop, Berwyn." The doors slid apart and the restless passengers piled in, standing room only.

The train clattered along on uneven tracks.

"Next stop, Belmont. Doors open on the right."

The train stopped alongside the west platform. The doors opened. Will elbowed his way out. The train left the station. He found a place clear of people and turned his backpack side up. He unzipped a small pocket, pulled

out his Eastview ID, and jammed it deep into his coat pocket. He headed toward the exit.

A girl, about his age, waited for a northbound train on the opposite platform, only slightly less crowded than the one Will left earlier. A dainty silver watch dangled undisturbed at her wrist. Her hair was tucked into a white cable-knit hat except for one long dark curl that fell in a delicate ribbon against her porcelain neck.

Will looked at her longer than anyone should ever look at any other person on an el platform. Her deep blue eyes caught Will. The corner of her mouth lifted. Will snapped his eyes to the orange and pink of the Dunkin' Donuts sign half a block down. A train whistled in the distance.

Will glanced across the tracks again. The blue-eyed girl still held him safely in her gaze. He did not look away.

The northbound train rattled into the station on a center track. Will strained to see the girl through the gaps between the cars.

"This is Belmont," the same voice announced from the other train. "Next stop, Addison."

The girl forced her way through the overcrowded el car. She smiled at Will through a window, her breath forming a soft cloud on the glass.

The train lurched and started to rattle away. Its cars, wrapped in ads for Hills Bros. and IKEA, alternated red, white, blue, yellow, ending with the bare stainless steel of the last car. Will jogged down the platform, following the

train until the screech of the third rail was swallowed by the noise of the restless street below.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### SERENDIPITY SMILES

A pale Halloween sun clung to the Lake Michigan horizon. It broke through the morning clouds, bright and promising a perfect fall day, crisp and clear. The morning light glistened on a new glass and steel mid-rise, an icy cube wedged between its more robust North Michigan Avenue neighbors. A limp crimson ribbon hung from one of the chrome door pulls at the main entrance. Above, a media façade stretched up three full stories of mostly black. At the top edge, the slender fingertips of a young woman peeled down one of the corners, revealing only her jade-green eyes. Three words in ember-white scrawl cut across the bottom. *Welcome home, Serendipity.*

In front of the building, a stage, set with a drum kit, an ebony Steinway, and a crumbling stone arch swathed in billowy black silk, consumed three-quarters of the wide sidewalk. Red-eyed devils and tattered undead held vigil on the remaining sliver of concrete.

A young boy wearing shredded jeans and a prosthetic gash across his cheek planted himself near the center of the throng, his nose buried in the awards edition of the gamer magazine, *Veil*. The jade-green eyes peered

from the cover. A Sharpie hooked to the top edge hung down between them.

The boy's father, knobby demon horns mounted to either side of his forehead, shifted his weight from one tender foot to the other. Gratefully, he nursed a non-fat latte, courtesy of the nearby coffee house and the last five bucks in his pocket. He amused himself by eavesdropping the snippets of conversation that managed to rise above the hum of the crowd.

“Hey, Dad,” interrupted the boy, not bothering to look up to see whether anyone was listening, “this article says M.L. Quig totally wins “Developer of the Year” and Serendipity Returns wins “Game of the Year.” It’s not even out ‘til next week! I can’t wait to play! M.L. is supposed to be here!”

A line four wide snaked along the building, undulating against a thin yellow cord, until it disappeared around the corner at the far end of the block. The remains of an impromptu campsite poked, haphazard and jagged, out of a dumpster roughly marked in spray painted block letters: *Mayor's Office of Special Events – Please do your part to keep Chicago clean.*

Hundreds of jack-o-lanterns, lit the night before, lined the curb facing the street, now slumping and mostly toothless, grinning mercilessly at everyone outside the rope.

Across the broad street, the crowd of unfortunates without the numbered wristbands, snapped up a week earlier within an hour, packed themselves onto the sidewalk, resigned to experience the pandemonium from a

distance. Police officers on horseback stationed themselves at short intervals along the roadway, shepherding too-eager onlookers off the street and back into the fray.

An un-costumed young man, face obscured by a faded black hoodie, stood still amid the chaos, hands in the front pockets of his threadbare jeans. He surveyed nearby onlookers and smiled, satisfied. He slipped to the back of the crowd, leaned against a storefront window, and breathed deep, absorbing the tumult and the crush of strangers crammed together in uncommon unity.

A pudgy, pimple-faced boy lurched back, crashing hard into the young man.

“Sorry, man,” the boy apologized, eyes still glued to the scene across the street. “This is so cool, isn’t it?” His question garnered no response. He turned around expecting to meet a silent glare, but found only his own bewildered reflection.

A police cruiser sped, lights flashing, to the end of the next block where it swerved, stopping across the lanes of traffic, shutting down one of the city’s busiest thoroughfares, previously closed only for state funerals and Oprah.

Near the building, burly men wearing day-glo green windbreakers unhooked the rope line and released the privileged into the street.

A visceral rumble reverberated off the buildings.  
The jade eyes blinked.



A mounted officer on the opposite side pulled his radio to his ear, nodded and, with a motion to his crew, released the unbraceleted gushing onto the pavement.

Another rumble surged through the crowd, hushing them in its sonic wake. A distant violin cried, sustaining a single plaintive note, then seamlessly transformed into a woman's voice, lush and poisonous.

*I . . .*

*travel alone*

*hear my song*

*no companion*

*to light my way*

*outside the walls I wait*

*timeless . . .*

*striking . . .*

*I . . . .*

*satisfy my soul*

*illuminating truth*

*in eternal retribution . . .*

The media façade flashed. The jade-eyed girl tore away the virtual film, exposing a knowing, half-cocked smile on a waifish face surrounded by wisps of jet black hair. A thick bronze spiral decorated with chicken-scratch symbols hovered at the hollow of her neck. The amulet radiated blades of hot white, overlapping until its eye burning halo filled the screen. The symbols floated off, morphing into the serpentine logo, *Serendipity Smiles*. The crowd roared.

The silk fell away from the arch. The singer stepped through and took a deep breath, the tops of her breasts spilling over the top of her corseted gown of ruby taffeta. She repeated the refrain. Her chestnut hair fell in soft waves over her shoulders.

She marched slowly to the piano and slid onto the bench. Her slender fingers moved over the instrument gracefully. The melody rose and fell as she attacked then caressed the keys in confidence and woe, fury and hope. Her song circled back, ending where it began, on a single mournful note, leaving the crowd still and uneasy.

She pounded out a few notes. Three men dressed in black jeans and scuffed leather jackets raced onto the stage and pumped out the first grinding chords of a goth-pop anthem. The crowd bobbed like a manic whack-a-mole. Half-an-hour later, the music dissolved as the singer's band mates left her at center stage to finish the last defiant refrain, quieting the crowd once again. She held the moment.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Mr. M.L. Quig." she announced coyly. The crowd exploded in applause, taking up a low-toned chant, "M. L., M. L., M. L."

A wiry man with head of thick, strawberry blond hair filled the media façade. The camera followed him closely as he bounced up the steps. Bulgari sunglasses flapped casually at the breast pocket of his dark, custom tailored suit.

He met the singer at center stage. She pushed the microphone bud away from her *Cherries in the Snow* lips

and whispered in his ear. Quig grinned. She lingered at his cheek, brushing her mouth across his skin as if no one were watching then walked off stage. Quig ogled the elegant line of her back and the luscious swish of her skirt as she descended the stairs and disappeared into the executive entrance of his new building.

He adjusted the tiny microphone at his chin and turned his attention to his crowd.

“Wow, this is amazing. You’re amazing!” Quig waved, working both ends of the stage. The din rose. He applauded his fans who responded with more volume.

“I know some of you have been waiting a very long time for this. Well, so have I!” He raised his arms, clapping his hands above his head, whipping the crowd's enthusiasm to near frenzy, sustaining the ovation for several minutes before continuing.

“About fifteen years ago now, in a cramped apartment on the north side of this very city . . .” The crowd howled in raucous approval. “. . . Serendipity was released from the Underworld, unwittingly born into our world with consequences none of us, not even those of us on the working side of the screen, could have imagined. In what seemed like an instant, she captured the imagination of gamers, like all of you, the world over.”

Quig continued with a thoughtful tone, “I hope you have enjoyed her journey as much as I have. Today, we mark a new era as we celebrate the return of my company, Serendipity Smiles, with our new headquarters and research and development center right here in my hometown, sweet home, Chicago.”

Quig stepped back, allowing the wave of admiration to swell.

“My friends . . .,” he attempted to break in.

“My friends,” he repeated, “as you know, we held an online competition to select a gamer worthy of welcoming Serendipity home and of being the first to join her on a new adventure, a gamer worthy of unveiling *Serendipity Returns*. Allow me to introduce ConstanZa.” Quig hopped off the side of the stage.

A petite girl with dishwater hair tied up in a loose ponytail at the back of her head stood timidly near the gleaming doors. She wore skinny jeans and a pink t-shirt beneath a brighter pink jacket. The camera on his heels, Quig walked over and shook the girl's hand. She giggled, her loose hand rising to conceal rosy cheeks and a mouth full of braces.

Quig handed ConstanZa a pair of cartoonish scissors and shuttled her toward the ribbon on the door. A handler positioned her so as not to block the company name etched into the glass. She opened the scissors wide then closed the blades with a sharp click. The ribbon dropped to the concrete below. Quig collected the pieces, handing half to the girl. He led her up the steps and paraded her along the front of the stage, ending at center. Quig counted with his fingers . . . one . . . two . . . on three they tossed the ribbons into the writhing crowd below.

A knot of tweens near the front of the stage screamed and waved homemade banners proclaiming *ConstanZa rocks!* The girl shifted her weight to one foot, tapping the toe of her other plaid sneaker on the stage.

Quig stepped back. ConstanZa daintily adjusted the mic at her chin, closed her eyes, and whispered each syllable with purpose: “Ser-en-dip-i-ty, Ser-en-dip-i-ty.” The crowd joined in, the speed and volume increasing until the chant exploded into cacophony.

The media façade faded to black. A jagged burnt-orange cliff burst onto the three story screen. At the bottom, Serendipity stared up, lean and small against the towering rock. A spark glinted off a thin shackle encircling her bare ankle. She looked over her shoulder, tied her long hair in a knot, blinked her jade eyes, and waited for ConstanZa’s direction.

Quig slipped away, abdicating center stage.

ConstanZa kicked off her sneakers, a shining ring at her ankle. She pulled a pair of palm-sized sticks from her jacket pocket. She studied the knobs and buttons, then raised her head, eyes focused intensely just above the crowd at her feet. She stretched herself tall, thrust her shoulders back, blinked once, and turned to lead Serendipity up the cliff.

Quig passed through the front doors of his building into an airy lobby which still smelled like wood sealer and wet paint. Tuxedoed servers circulated among the VIPs with silver trays of blood orange martinis and miniature toasts topped with slices of applewood bacon and quail eggs, sunny side up.

Quig made his way to the center of the room, shaking hands with half-a-dozen men in suits then jogged up a flight of glass stairs to the second floor vestibule. He stood in front of the doors admiring the serpentine logo he

had designed fifteen years earlier. He waved his company ID at the small box at the jamb, waited for the click, then went inside.

Just beyond the doors, a woman in a severe skirted suit waited in the corner office. She leaned on the edge of a desk still piled high with cardboard boxes. *Elizabeth Denton*, read her ID, *Senior Vice President, Operations, Serendipity Smiles, Chicago*.

“At last,” she said, exasperated.

“Beth! Good to see you, too!”

“Where’s the Kleenex?” She dug through a box. “Hold on, here we are.” She plucked a tissue out of its box and scrubbed the lipstick off Quig’s cheek. She handed him a company check and a pen.

“What’s this?”

“Band. They’re getting ready to leave.”

"Mmm, too bad." He signed and handed everything back to Ms. Denton. “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to these events.”

“Oh, don’t give me that.”

Quig pulled his smartphone from his jacket pocket and tapped at the screen. “Look at the time.”

“She’ll be fine.”

“I know, I know. I just . . .”

“Come with me.” Ms. Denton took his upper arm and led him to the front window. “Look at that. Kids and parents and everyone in between standing shoulder to shoulder, all mesmerized by one little girl playing *your* game. Do you think she would want you to miss that?”

“No, of course not.” Quig scanned the street below one last time. He turned to Ms. Denton and smiled. “So, what do you think of my new office?”



## CHAPTER FIVE

### NOBODY

Eastview College Preparatory Academy commanded half a city block on the north side of Chicago, all red brick and uniform windows, more factory than school. Only a narrow band of well-kept lawn dotted with mature parkway maples, now losing their leaves to the autumn chill, softened the harsh façade. A six-story clock tower marked the main entrance. A lithe strawberry-blonde girl loitered in its shadow. She pulled her backpack to her hip and unzipped a pocket. She slid out a small mirror. Holding it above and to the side, she smoothed a loose strand of hair into the tidy knot at the back of her head.

She tucked the mirror away, leaned the backpack to the opposite side, and dug out a crumpled hot pink sticky note. She pressed the note against her thigh, ironing it flat with her fingers. *Have a great first day! Sorry I couldn't see you off. Happy Birthday, my Sweet Sixteen! See you at dinner. Love you, Pumpkin - Dad.*

She smiled a sideways smile then returned the note to her backpack. She knelt to re-tie the laces of her oxfords, savoring a last few minutes of anonymity.



The school bell buzzed a cranky first warning. The girl popped up and flung her backpack over her shoulder. She brushed a stray bit of fuzz from her stiff navy blazer, adjusted the pleats in her gray plaid skirt, and jogged up a couple of steps to the door. Her shoes tapped against the well-worn limestone. She inhaled, preparing herself to pass through the thin barrier separating her from what waited for her on the other side.

She reached for the door. It swung out fast, just missing her outstretched hand.

“You must be Jordyn!” gleefully shouted a chunky girl with short, over-highlighted hair. “I’m Cooper Lawson, Year Ten Representative.” She stood in the open doorway, straight and tall as she could, her chest puffed out as if she had rehearsed in front of a mirror more than twice. “Funny name, I know. I’m pretty sure Mom and Dad wanted a boy. Oh, well.” She let out a laugh that sounded nearly as unnatural as her introduction.

“Come in, come in,” she added, enthusiastically shoving her chubby, pink hand toward Jordyn. A dozen other students, more boys than girls, watched the abrupt introduction with zealous interest.

A woman with a frilly coral colored scarf at her neck poked her head out of a nearby office. “On your way now,” she chided, sending the gawkers down the corridor craning for a glimpse of Eastview’s newest.

An athletic boy wearing an “Eastview Football” pin on his lapel lagged behind. He smiled in Jordyn’s direction and walked toward her. She looked over her shoulder hoping to see someone else.

“Hi. I’m Logan Harris.” He offered his hand.

Jordyn jerked her head forward, quickly crossing her arms behind herself, fiddling with the zippers on her backpack. Logan dropped his hand.

“Hi,” Jordyn responded curtly, looking past him toward the office door.

Logan persisted. “Don’t pay any attention to them. They’re just curious.”

“About my dad, I know. M.L. Quig, my golden ticket.”

“Can you blame them?”

“Guess not.”

“Wow, your eyes are nice,” he said.

Jordyn’s hand shot up to her face. She scratched her forehead then let her hand fall casually. “You say that to all the girls.”

“That sounded really bad, didn’t it?”

“Um, yeah. It really did.”

“I meant they’re so mocha-y, uh, -ish, uh, brown . . . uh . . . sorry.”

“Maybe you should quit while you’re ahead.”

“Yeah. I should.” The first period bell buzzed.

“Saved by the bell.”

“Very funny. I think it’s me who’s saved.”

“I gotta get to class. Maybe I’ll see you around?”

He offered his hand again. “I’m Logan.”

Jordyn took his hand. “Nice to meet you, Logan.”

“Miss Quig,” interrupted the woman from the office, “please, come with me. We need to assign you a locker and get your class schedule.”

“See you,” said Logan. He turned and jogged away.

“Miss Quig, please step into the office for a minute while I get your schedule.” The woman held the door wide open, tapping her index finger on the knob.

The second bell buzzed. A dark-haired boy rushed down the corridor, clumsily peeling off his backpack and coat as he skidded around the far corner.

The woman frowned in his direction. “Late and out of uniform again.”

Jordyn entered the office. She followed the woman to the far side of a large room filled tight with desks and beige file cabinets, all aligned in orderly rows. A fluorescent light flickered overhead.

“I am Mrs. Hansen, Head of Student Services. Have a seat.” She motioned to a blue plastic chair in front of a desk with a computer, a printer, and nothing more. Mrs. Hansen sat at the desk and clicked the mouse a few times. The printer chugged. “I’ll walk you through orientation this morning. Looks like you’re missing one registration form. Your father will need to complete that.” Mrs. Hansen pulled a single paper from the desk drawer and handed it to Jordyn. “Here you are. Make sure you return it on Monday.” She checked her watch. “We’ll start with a tour of the school. Afterward, I’ll show you to your locker. You’ll have a few minutes to organize it before second period.”

She took Jordyn’s schedule off the printer. “You have Geography first period, that’s now, on the second floor. Professor Embry knows you’ll be with me this

morning. Miss Lawson attends that class. I'm sure she would be happy to share her notes."

"I'm sure," grumbled Jordyn.

Mrs. Hansen's face tightened.

"I mean, I'm sure I'll see her later. I'll ask for the notes then."

"Come with me, Miss Quig. No time to waste."

Mrs. Hansen sprinted to the office door.

They walked the empty corridors. Mrs. Hansen led Jordyn past the academic wings, the gym, and the commons which already smelled like meat sauce and garlic bread.

"Pasta for lunch today," said Mrs. Hansen. As she walked, she pointed to the bulletin board, decorated with paper cutouts of apples and milk cartons.

"As you will see, our student body is quite diverse," she explained.

"Except for money," Jordyn commented under her breath.

"Some of our students receive generous scholarships. Nevertheless, we do have to keep the lights on somehow. This way to the library, Miss Quig." She directed Jordyn up a wide terrazzo stairway.

At the top of the stairs, Mrs. Hansen pulled open a heavy wood door and ushered Jordyn into an immense room filled with row after row of carved wood shelves and long heavy tables.

"Follow me, Miss Quig," directed Mrs. Hansen. She led Jordyn past the stacks and up another flight of stairs to the third floor. "As you can see, our collection is

extensive. The library occupies a large portion of two floors. The lower floor holds most of our volumes and computer carrels.” They stopped at a cozy arrangement of cushy sofas and nubby chairs nestled in the sunlight streaming in from high arched windows. “The upper floor primarily holds reference material and reading clusters like this one. It is usually very quiet up here. Let’s keep moving, shall we.”

When they reached the opposite side of the room, Mrs. Hansen stopped, leaning her backside against a low window sill. “Any questions, Miss Quig?”

Jordyn looked past her down into an unkempt courtyard at the first floor.

“Miss Quig? Any questions?”

“How do I get down there?”

“There?”

“Yes. Is that the door?” Jordyn pointed toward an overgrown corner.

“No one goes there. It’s just an old courtyard. We only use it for light these days.”

“My father used to take me to small gardens when I was little. He likes to work on his games there. Thinks they’re inspiring or something. Probably why I like them.” Jordyn looked Mrs. Hansen square in the face. “Too bad this one is so neglected.”

Mrs. Hansen fiddled with her scarf. She stepped away from the window and looked down into the scruff below. She checked her wristwatch. “Well, Miss Quig, it looks like we’ve used up all of our time.”

Mrs. Hansen showed Jordyn to her locker. “Here you are. You have a few minutes before the bell. Please, let me know if there is anything else I can do for you.”

“Thank you. I will.” Jordyn opened her locker.

“Miss Quig?”

“Yes, Mrs. Hansen?”

“I’ll see if I can get maintenance into the courtyard. Maybe they can tidy up.”

Jordyn Quig was no longer a nobody standing outside on a clear fall day.



## CHAPTER SIX

# LEAVING

Timothy Stillman savored one last bite of apple pecan pie. He scraped a stray crumb off his thick white plate, laid the fork on top, and pushed the empty dish toward the business side of the lunch counter. He took a long, slow sip from his oversized cup of black coffee. The mid-day rush had waned and only he, a waitress named Sadie, and the cook remained in Twila's Diner, Provident's best and only sit-down restaurant.

"That be all, Mr. Stillman?" asked Sadie.

"Top off my coffee, would you, please?" The waitress re-filled the heavy mug. "Thanks, Sadie."

"We've gotten used to having you around. Too bad you have to leave us."

"It's time. My work's done."

"You know she thought the world of you."

"Not sure why," Stillman wondered aloud.

"She had good reason," Sadie replied confidently with a half-wink. "Did you see the paper this morning?" She tilted her head toward the disheveled pile of newsprint at the far end of the counter.

Stillman shook his head.

Sadie frowned. "Ran her obit."

"Guess it's finally official then."

"Wrote it herself . . . as a column."

"I didn't know her very long, but that sounds about right."

Sadie gathered up the paper and shuffled through until she found the right page. "Paper staff put together a photo essay, too." She folded it in half and then in half again and handed it to Stillman. "Here." She pointed to a column in the upper left corner entitled *101 Things You Can Do With Hairspray* by Dorothea Whitford, who, based on her headshot, used plenty of the stuff. Her stout black beehive evoked more helmet than hair.

The column filled only a few inches.

*My Dear Friends,*

*If you are reading this, I most certainly have met my untimely demise. No hard feelings. Though, I must confess, I will truly miss Twila's apple pecan pie.*

Stillman glanced at his empty plate. The corner of his lip curled into a knowing smirk.

*Not for long-winded goodbyes, I will do my best to keep this short. No laughing, now.*

*On January 15th, I rolled into this town in a rust bucket hatchback. It would not have been memorable to me or anyone else except for the fact that it was the coldest day on record. I stopped at*



*Twila's for a bite on my way to the dilapidated farmhouse I would soon call home. I returned to my car to find every door frozen stiff. Not sure who noticed first, but within minutes, half a dozen of you were standing out in that cold with me, cans of deicer and hairdryers on extension cords in hand.*

*We are rarely surprised when those close to us rise above our expectations and lay themselves down for us without hesitation. But, it is the mundane, like opening a door for a stranger, that reveals the divine in each of us.*

*I must say, earthly life was magnificent. But, with God's grace, I've landed somewhere nice. Wherever I am, I hope there are friends like you and, of course, a big slice of apple pecan with my name on it.*

Stillman unfolded the paper, lingering on each of the photos filling the rest of the page.

Dorothea Whitford was not an exceptionally large woman, but because of the way she wore her clothes she looked as if she were made of bubbles, one stacked slightly askew on the next. Time had faded the freshness of her youth, but she struck everyone she met as an unusually handsome woman, though they could never put their finger on just why.

"Did you see this one, Sadie?" Stillman pointed to a picture of a sixty-ish woman, Santa hat squeezed onto her hairdo, handing out overstuffed Christmas stockings to grinning and wide-eyed children.

"Those kids were thrilled. Oh, look at this one." Sadie pointed to a picture of the woman, shovel in hand, dirt smudged across her forehead. "That was two summers ago at the groundbreaking for the library addition." Sadie scanned the page. "There she is drinking out of the Cross County Softball Cup. That tournament raised the money for the tot lot." Sadie paused, looking at the smudgy images. "I never realized how much she did for this town . . . for us . . ."

The cook shelved the last of his iron skillet with a clang then burst through the kitchen door, joining the waitress behind the counter. "Miss Whitford sure appreciated all your help, Mr. Stillman," he said. "She was always going on about you. I'm sure she'd be pleased, you putting everything in order since, well, since she's been gone."

Stillman looked up from the paper. "It's nothing. Just my job." He folded the paper. "Mind if I hang onto this?"

"She would have liked that," said Sadie.

Stillman stuffed the paper in his front pocket and reached for his wallet.

"Not today, Mr. Stillman," Sadie insisted.

"Thanks." He reached over the counter and gave the cook single, firm handshake. "I'll miss this place."

"Better hit the road soon if you want to make it before it gets dark," said Sadie.

"Yeah. I still have a couple of things to wrap up across the street."

The overhead bell on the door tinkled sweetly as Stillman walked out of diner onto the sunlit sidewalk. He looked both ways out of habit and crossed the empty street, stopping in front of a large, multi-colored building.

Provident Theater and Studios stood at the dead center of town. It had been Timothy Stillman's home since his arrival four-and-a-half months earlier at Miss Dorothea Whitford's request. Over that time, Stillman documented every aspect of the theater turned museum and its contents, meticulously updating Miss Whitford's appraisal records for her insurance policy, which, upon her disappearance, had taken on unexpected significance. After the storm, he stayed on to clean up the damage.

Since its dedication in 1922, the building had played host to decades of the famous and the obscure. Rumor had it the Studios once housed a Prohibition era speakeasy, though Stillman could never get anyone to confirm that.

Unoccupied for months, the building now languished, its windows still clad in board-up plywood from the storm. Stillman ran his hand along the cracked terracotta façade, carefully fixing the time-mellowed gold and blue in his mind like a scrapbook memento.

He pulled a thick brass key with worn letters from his hip pocket and, with a soft ker-clunk, unlocked the lobby doors. He punched the push-button light switch. A pair of amber-colored sconces dimly lit the three-story space. A squat jack-o-lantern, recently carved with a wide, Cheshire grin, smiled from the top of a dusty glass display case.

Bits of cobalt-glazed ceiling plaster crunched beneath Stillman's feet as he crossed the shadowy lobby. He punched more switches, illuminating an immense chandelier and the riser lights along the sweeping stairs leading to either side of the mezzanine gallery.

A flimsy brass sign stand lay on the floor near the lobby door. Limp poster board, deformed by the humidity of summer, slumped in the sign frame, rendering it's gracious message, *Welcome to Dorothea's Curiosity Shop and Museum of Unusual Objects*, barely legible.

An assortment of mismatched display cases stood exactly as they did the day of the storm, except the one nearest the front window which had toppled and shattered, spilling its contents across the floor. Stillman had painstakingly cleaned it up, documenting and packing each object with utmost care. The remnants of the exhibit barely filled two small boxes, which he had not yet placed in storage. The bent case stood empty in a dark corner of the lobby.

Stillman plodded up the wide stairs, dust puffing up from the carpet with each step. When he reached the top, he opened the side door, turning the lock with the same key. The door opened into a long, whitewashed corridor with several identical doors.

Stillmand entered the third studio. It held only a single empty bookshelf secured to the wall at the far corner. A thick layer of dust had settled on the oak floor. The faint remnants of footprints led from the door to the bookshelf and back again. Stillman followed his own steps. He reached under the chest-level shelf and tapped

the top of the back panel, popping open a hidden compartment.

He pulled out a cardboard moving box marked "kitchen" and folded back the loose flaps. He removed a brown paper wrapped package no larger than a deck of cards, the only object in the museum he did not appraise. He carefully tucked it into his back pocket.

He left the box on the floor and returned to the lobby. With the same key, he unlocked a padlock hanging from a chain looped through the graceful bronze handles of the theater house doors. He let the chain fall heavily to the floor.

Stillman entered the space, his toe nudging one of the boxes now holding the contents of the shattered case. He turned a knob on the wall. The theater lights rose, soft amber illuminating the tops of ceiling high stacks of wood crates, each large enough to hold a small car, and open utility shelves filled with storage boxes.

Stillman picked up the boxes at his feet and walked down the center aisle, stopping two-thirds of the way to the stage. He double-checked the identification tags and slid the boxes into their respective places. He walked back up the aisle, pausing every ten feet or so to double-check a box or a tag marking the location of each artifact like a catalog in three dimensions, the handwritten record of the last four months of his life. He closed the theater doors behind him, looped the chains through the handles, and secured the padlock, laying it gently against the old wood.

Stillman collected the pumpkin from the lobby. It left a circular imprint on the dusty case. He walked out into the fading afternoon light, locked the doors, and tucked the old key back into his hip pocket. From his truck he retrieved a thick envelope and went back across the street to Twila's. He set the pumpkin on the counter and handed the envelope to Sadie. "The insurance company will want this when they get here," he said. Sadie nodded. Stillman left again.

He slipped the small package out of his jeans and sunk into the cab of his truck, turning the package over in his hands from front to back to front. He laid it on top of the bible, riding shotgun since July, and tucked them both deep into a duffel bag stashed on the floor of the passenger side. He dug his phone out of the glove compartment. He scrolled through half a dozen missed calls from National Risk Insurance and one unknown. Then he dialed.

"Yes," answered a cool voice.

"I'm leaving."

"The file's been assigned for investigation." The voice wavered. "There was a photograph. They know it's missing."

"You knew it was flagged. You knew this would happen when it didn't show up. Relax. Eventually they'll just write it off as missing."

"Maybe you should amend your report, add it to the inventory, buy some time."

"They'd discover it at the audit and then there's the liquidation auction, too. By the time they notice anything

it will be January. You'll have some time. We're in deep enough already. No need to compound it any further."

The voice turned icy. "You're in this with me. You handled the inventory. It's your name on the appraisal records, not mine."

"Yeah, I know. See you in Chicago."

The line went dead.

Stillman mumbled into the silent phone. "It's too late to change anything, anyway. The file's open."



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### LEAST AMONG US

Cloud-filtered sunlight bounced off the full-length mirror in the corner of Jordyn's bedroom. She inspected her school uniform one last time then smoothed her long ponytail before twisting it up and pinning it at the back of her head. She rubbed at her cheeks trying to salvage whatever was left of the healthy glow from spending a lazy summer in San Diego where she shared a dilapidated Ocean Beach cottage with her father and a feral tabby cat, named Mr. Orange, who lived under the front steps. She shared the beach with surfers and stoners and seagulls, none of whom cared to know her name.

Grudgingly, she picked up her backpack, heavy with new textbooks, and lugged it downstairs to the second floor breakfast room. At the center of the otherwise empty table lay the completed registration form, an electric blue sticky note at the top: *Fresh OJ in the fridge. Happy Monday! Love, Dad.* Jordyn peeled off the note and dropped it into the trash under the kitchen sink. She stuffed the paper into her blazer pocket. Heaving her bag over her shoulder on the way down the steps, she dragged



herself to the foyer. She pulled on her overcoat and left for school under an overcast sky.

Newly rehabbed three-flats and ostentatious rowhomes, nearly every one sporting a tiny boxwood lined garden, peppered her new neighborhood. At the end of the block, a toddler sat in her stroller happily chewing the ear of her toy bunny. The child's mother, dressed in a smart suit and high heels, handed the nanny a list and kissed her daughter goodbye.

Jordyn rounded the corner at the end of the block and walked along Lincoln Avenue past the children's hospital, past hip boutiques and swanky bistros, then headed west toward the Fullerton el stop where she boarded a southbound train. By the time she walked up the Eastview steps, the sky had cleared to an inviting patchwork of gauzy clouds against milky blue. She went inside anyway.

The administration office was empty. She took a seat in an orange plastic chair and waited. She pulled out her schedule. *Embry for Geography. Wikstrom, Literature. Third period, Reynolds, O. Chem. Fourth period, American History. Lunch.*

The office door popped open. A thin woman Jordyn hadn't met escorted a girl with long, curly black hair into the room.

"Please wait here, Miss Callaghan," said the woman sternly. "Miss Quig, I'll be right with you."

The woman guided the girl to a desk near the center of the room. Neither sat. The woman pulled a small sewing box from a pencil drawer and handed it to the girl.

She opened the box and gathered a needle, a tiny pair of scissors, a navy button, and a skinny spool of navy thread. She set the items and the open box on the desk, took off her blazer and, still standing, threaded the needle and began to sew the button onto the cuff. When she was done the girl draped her blazer over her forearm, returned the items to the box, handed the box back to the woman, and smiled warmly. The woman frowned, dropped the box back into the drawer, and closed it with a sharp clang. The girl's smile did not waiver. She put on her blazer and walked toward the door.

"Miss Callaghan, please remember to polish your shoes for tomorrow. They look like you've been tromping through puddles. Off to class now."

The girl nodded and continued out the office door.

"Now, Miss Quig. I am Ms. Novak. How may I help you?"

Jordyn stood and pulled the crumpled paper from her pocket. "Mrs. Hansen asked me to have my father to complete this form." Jordyn handed the woman the paper. "I'm just dropping it off."

"Very well. Thank you." The woman took the paper.

"Ms. Novak?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Who is she? That girl?"

"Oh, her? Just a scholarship student. Fifteen minutes to first bell, Miss Quig. Better get going, dear, if you want to find your class on time." Ms. Novak shuffled

through the papers stacked in the in-box on the counter, paying no attention to Jordyn's glare.

Jordyn walked slowly, stopped at her locker on the first floor, and looked out the window of the scruffy courtyard she'd seen from the library. She still managed to arrive on the second floor at Professor Embry's Geography classroom a full ten minutes before the first bell. She opened the door. The room smelled like mushrooms. Old maps papered the front wall. Shelves of crumbly books lined the back of the room. Tall windows ran the length of the outside wall. A group of students gathered at the glass, focused on the street below.

Cooper sat on the wide sill. A small girl with a sour expression and four honey-blond twists like cinnamon buns stuck at the top of her head stood on a chair, draping herself over Logan's broad shoulders. The rest had been among Jordyn's first-day gawkers.

The door slipped from Jordyn's hand. It slammed with a metallic crack. Copper wheeled around, hopping up and down. "Oh, Jordyn! You're here! Hi!"

Jordyn waved politely.

Logan peeled the sour-faced girl off his shoulders. "I didn't know you were in this class."

"Yeah, right." Jordyn surveyed the neat rows of chairs, writing tablets all unusually clear of doodles. "So, where do I sit?"

"I sit in front," said Logan.

"Where everyone can see him," jabbed the girl with the twisty hair.

"Thanks, Alex. Remind me to tell your ugly boyfriend I saw you checking out the football team after school yesterday."

Alex showed him her middle finger then returned to the window.

Logan motioned to the front row. "There's an empty seat next to mine."

"Why not?" Jordyn plopped her backpack into the seat.

Cooper squealed. "Ooh, here he comes!"

Logan walked back to the window. "Mark, who won?" A short boy with meaty arms ran the tip of his pen down a piece of notebook paper.

"Burgundy tie, no stripes. Looks like Alex."

A girl with thick eyeliner and pale orange lipstick groaned. "Alex again?"

Alex put out both of her hands. "Aww, sucks for you, Jilly. Pay up, losers." The other students handed her wads of cash as she cast her unsympathetic sneer upon each of them.

Jordyn joined the group at the window. "Hi, Cooper. What's all this?"

"Oh, um, it's nothing. There's just this guy who walks by the school every day. We make bets on him. Kinda funny, don't you think?"

"Maybe. I guess." Jordyn crossed her arms.

A man in a navy suit squatted at the gutter. His longish black hair was slicked back into a short ponytail at the back of his neck. He prodded a bottle cap in the

gutter. A small paper bag and long black umbrella lay on the sidewalk near his feet.

Cooper sidled up against Jordyn and continued her explanation. "He walks the neighborhood at exactly the same time, crossing the exact same streets every single morning, even if it's pouring rain. Well, if it's raining the umbrella is open, but otherwise, there's no difference."

The man bagged the bottle cap and neatly folded the top of the bag closed. He unfolded the bag, checked its contents, and folded it down again. He did this two more times then pulled a pen from his breast pocket and scribbled something on the brown paper. He pocketed the pen and the bag, picked up his umbrella, and walked a few feet before poking at an empty Butterfinger wrapper with the tip of his polished shoe.

"We used to bet on when he would show up, but after a few days that got boring since he shows up at exactly the same time every day." Cooper snorted an oinky laugh. "Now we bet on what he wears or what he does, like which piece of trash he will look at or if he will put it in his bag. Sometimes we leave things for him. Mark left the Butterfinger. Took us a while to get that right. Too big and it won't fit in the paper bag. Too small and he misses it. Mondays are always more interesting, of course, because the street sweeper hasn't been by in a week."

Alex chimed in, "Mark brought in binoculars so we could bet on his tie. I always win."

"Ooh, look, there's that Irish girl," said Cooper.

Mark craned to see. "What's her name?"

Cooper answered, "Deirdre Callaghan."

Mark shook his head.

Cooper put her hands in the air. "What? Honestly. It's my business as your class representative to know these things."

Mark shook his head again. "Sad, Cooper. So sad. Look, she's talking to the weirdo."

Deirdre touched the man on the elbow, both smiled. The first bell rang. Deirdre excused herself and ran toward the school entrance.

"Maybe she's his illegitimate daughter," hissed Alex.

"Maybe he just likes little girls," said Logan.

"You don't know anything about him." The students at the window turned toward the voice. William Emerson sat alone in the back row, face toward the front of the room. He leaned back in his seat, tapping the eraser end of a pencil on the desktop.

Logan stepped away from the group. "He's a freak. Just like you."

Will stood, facing Logan. "I think if someone didn't know you, by looks alone they'd guess you were an idiot."

"That's what you think?"

Will did not respond.

Logan pushed through the row of desks.

Will did not move.

Logan's face reddened. "I think you need to shut up. Nobody is interested in your opinion. You're just another freeloader. Maybe you and that girl and the freak should

get together and form your own sorry ass club.” The other students snickered.

Professor Embry barreled through the door.

“OK, everyone. Find your seats. Show’s over.” He dropped a stack of thick books and rolled maps onto his desk. “Chapter four today, folks. Let’s go.” The group near the window scrambled to their desks and dug out their textbooks. Logan and Will stayed. Jordyn took her seat at the front of the room and shuffled through her backpack, watching them from the corner of her eye.

Professor Embry leaned forward, both hands on his desk. He peered over his half-moon glasses. “Mr. Harris, to your seat, please.”

On his way to the front of the class, Logan slammed into Will’s shoulder. “You’re dead, Emerson.”



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### GRACE

Jordyn jotted down the last of her notes in third period chemistry lab. Professor Reynolds stopped in front of her work station. "Miss Quig, may I borrow your beaker?" Jordyn shrugged and handed it over.

He swirled the pale yellow fluid and lifted it shoulder high. "This, class, is what you should be seeing about now."

Half of the students mumbled, the others had their heads down trying to finish the experiment. A kitchen timer dinged at the front of the room.

Professor Reynolds set the beaker down. "Nice work, Miss Quig." He walked to the front of the class and clapped his hands twice. "Time to clean up. Don't forget to put your journals in the basket on your way out. Next time we'll be synthesizing aspirin. Don't forget, you owe me two pages on the scientific method and how we apply that in the lab. I expect concrete examples, people."

Jordyn cleared her station and peeled off her gloves. She slid her goggles off her head and jammed them and her books into her backpack.



Cooper, Alex, and Jilly waited near the door. Cooper leaned against a low shelf, saying hello, by name, to everyone in sight. Jilly freshened her lipstick and wiped a smudge from under her eye. Alex hiked up her skirt.

Jordyn grabbed her things and headed for the door.

Cooper stopped her. "Jordyn, your lab coat."

"Oh, thanks. Forgot." Jordyn tossed her log into the basket. She shook off the white coat and stuffed it into her bag as she bolted out of the room.

Copper, Alex, and Jilly followed close on her heels.

"I have to get some stuff out of my locker before next period," said Jordyn, doing her best to dissuade them without being rude.

"Oh, okay. We'll come along," said Cooper.

Jordyn flew down the corridor. The girls chattered behind her, Alex the loudest. "Mr. Reynolds is so disgusting. I swear, if he blew his nose one more time I would've had to puke." Jilly jabbed her index finger deep into her mouth, fake gagging. Alex rolled her eyes.

Cooper came to his defense. "Oh, I don't think he's that bad. You know how they get. He's just a little old, that's all."

Alex stopped in the hall near the exit to the boys' locker room and cocked her hip to one side.

Cooper blushed. "Oh, Alex. Let's go. They're coming."

"Kind of the point, isn't it." Alex unbuttoned the top of her school blouse and pulled it open. A tiny red heart stained the top of her breast just above her push-up bra.

The freshmen spilled into the hall. "Hey, boys! Got a new one. Wanna see?"

Jilly giggled and dragged Alex down the hall by her elbow.

Jordyn let the girls' antics drift past her, not worth the effort of a reaction. Like the others before them, this newest entourage didn't care what she thought so long as they were seen together by the ordinary students, the kids with little hope of ever being her friend or theirs.

Jordyn stopped quickly, sending the girls skidding. Standing squarely in front of her locker, she blocked it top to bottom, frustrating the absurd curiosity of her newly acquired friends. She turned the knob and popped open the door. Alex and Jilly jockeyed for a glimpse inside the dark box even though every book, pen, and magazine poster of a famous boy was exactly the same as theirs. Jordyn closed the locker door with a resonant clang. She turned around expecting to find the girls rapt, but their attention had been redirected. Deirdre Callaghan walked toward them.

Alex's words went acid. "Who wears second-hand uniforms, anyway?"

"Poor people," answered Jilly. "Just look at it. Ug-ly."

Cooper shrunk behind them.

Deirdre passed by. Instantly Alex, Jilly, and Cooper were gone, in pursuit of something far more interesting than the contents of a high school locker.

Jordyn wandered down the hall. She looked out the window into the ragged courtyard. She tried the door. It was unlocked. She went outside.

The corner of a small concrete bench peeked out from behind an overgrown evergreen. She brushed away the loose needles, clearing a space large enough to sit concealed in the stillness of the garden. Her eyes wandered up the amber-tinged ivy still clinging tenuously to the brick wall to a square of clear blue sky above.

Deirdre darted into the courtyard. Jordyn tucked herself behind the branches of the evergreen. Deirdre stood motionless a few feet inside the courtyard door. Loose curls fell untamed over her shoulders, her clean porcelain face tinged pink at the cheeks, her eyes wide.

Alex and Jilly crashed through the door and forced her tight into a corner. Deirdre's hair fluttered with each of Jilly's belligerent huffs. Alex, hands on hips, looked Deirdre up and down. "Saw you talking to that freak. Asking for fashion tips? You could use some."

Deirdre said nothing.

Jilly brushed Deirdre's curls back from her face. "Amazing blue eyes, don't you think, Alex? And so delicate." Jilly ran her fingertip along the top edge of Deirdre's ear and down her jawbone, stabbing her fingernail up into the soft hollow beneath her chin. "Too bad she thinks she can just come in here and do whatever she wants. Think maybe she should seriously consider going back to wherever she came from?"

Alex grunted.

"Shame to mess up something so pretty," said Jilly. She slowly stroked Deirdre's hair then kissed her lips and laughed.

"I don't know, Jilly. Remember that Anderson girl?" Alex lunged forward, jamming Deirdre deeper into the corner. "Watch yourself, Callaghan." And the pair left as quickly as they had come.

Deirdre straightened her blazer and wiped Jilly's orange lipstick on her sleeve. She sat down, crisscross on the damp concrete. Jordyn scooted forward on the bench and cleared her throat. She shouldered her bag and walked across the courtyard.

Jordyn extended her hand. "Are you okay? I'm so sorry. I should've . . ."

Deirdre took her hand, hopped up, and brushed off her uniform. "I'll be fine," she said, the words somehow more reassuring in her soft brogue.

"Have you been at Eastview long?" asked Jordyn.

"Long enough."

Jordyn looked through the window into the busy corridor. Alex hung on the arm of one of the boys she'd caught coming from the locker room earlier. Jilly and Cooper hovered nearby. Deirdre looked around the courtyard. "Haven't been in here before now. I've always been fond of the neglected."

"It must be hard for you, coming to a place so different."

"I've been here awhile now."

"Oh, it's just . . . your accent . . ."

"That? Hasn't changed much."

The bell rang. Jordyn walked to the door and held it open. "What do you have next?"

"American History."

Jordyn laughed. "Me, too. I'll walk with you."

Jordyn had been in the library nearly an hour after dismissal. She lugged a stack of chemistry books to the third floor and found a deserted reading cluster near a window overlooking the street in front of the school. She dropped the books on a side table and sat on the cushy sofa. She leaned into the soft cushions and sighed.

"Concrete examples," she said to herself. "Right."

She sat up and leafed through the books, laying each on the sofa, open to the relevant page, until they crowded her out of her seat. The afternoon sky was still bright and she gave in to the distraction of the bare tree tops swaying on the other side of the glass.

William Emerson walked below. Logan and Mark followed, quickly gaining ground. Mark put his thick hand on Will's shoulder. Will stopped, turned toward them, and said something. Logan's face twisted up and turned red.

Mark knocked Will's backpack to the sidewalk. Will picked up his bag and walked away. Logan blocked his path, bumping him backwards. Mark ripped Will's backpack out of his hand and hurled it across the narrow yard. He grabbed Will from behind, holding him tight. Logan hit Will in the face. Blood ran from his mouth. Jordyn raised her hand to her lips. She looked at her fingertips, surprised to see her own clean skin.

Logan punched Will hard in the gut. He buckled, falling to the grass below. Logan kicked Will in the ribs, leaving him curled in a ball, gasping. Logan and Mark continued down the block as if nothing had happened.

Will lay still for a moment, then rolled to his back, arms wide as if to make a snow angel in the newly fallen leaves. Bits of dried grass clung to his bloody face. He closed his eyes.

"Get up!" whispered Jordyn. She looked around the room. The floor was empty. She glanced at Will, still lying in the grass. She threw her books into her backpack and looked out the window one more time. Will opened his eyes, staggered to his feet, and looked up at the library window. Jordyn jerked herself back. Her cheeks burned.

Will crossed himself, collected his backpack, and walked away. Jordyn pressed her face against the cool glass, watching his back until he turned a corner at the end of the block and she could see him no longer.



## CHAPTER NINE

### SHUT AND OPEN

Will got off the el at Berwyn. He caught a glimpse of himself in the security mirror of the convenience store tucked beneath the train station. He wiped his sleeve across his mouth smearing the blood still dribbling from his throbbing lip. It oozed, thick and salty, across his tongue.

He jogged two blocks home, fumbling in his pocket for keys as he reached the door of the graystone three-flat, rehabbed by his parents before he was born. Inside, he took the steps two at a time to the middle floor. Will dropped his backpack at the front door, tossed his keys on the credenza, and headed for the bathroom sink. He splashed his face with water, recoiling from the cold sting on his split lip. A few ruby drops splattered onto the white subway tiles behind the sink and dripped down the wall; the rest spiraled down the drain until the water ran clear.

Will pulled off his coat and sat on the edge of the tub. He buried his bruised face in a towel and mumbled, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If

someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also."

He dabbed at the corner of his mouth, wincing, and got up to look in the mirror. He scowled at his reflection. "Why? Why should I turn the other cheek? I'm still here. I'm still here bleeding!"

Will threw the towel at the mirror and stormed out. He paused outside his father's bedroom, putting his ear to the closed door. He traced up the jamb with his index finger and made a fist, drawing it back to knock. He loosened his hand and let it drop.

The following morning a sharp rap against the front door interrupted the pre-dawn hush. Will rolled over, bumping his battered chin on a thick book. *Ancient Cult Objects* by Iain Pritchard lay on the spare pillow, half-covered by a blanket, tucked in. Will opened his eyes, pushed the book off the bed, and kicked his covers half-way over the footboard. He slid down onto a small rug beside his bed and sat on his heels trying to focus on the blank wall in front of him. Rising tall on his knees, he closed his eyes, and turned his palms up in supplication. "Lord, help me to follow your example in all my thoughts and deeds." He crossed himself, pulled on a sweatshirt, and went outside to retrieve the paper.

The sun's first rays lit the neighborhood a milky gray. Hundred-year-old parkway trees stretched over the street, holding back the pale sky with their leafless net. Will tiptoed barefoot onto the cold stoop. His flannel pajamas offered his legs little warmth. He picked up the paper and hurried back inside to the kitchen.



He set the kettle to boil and grabbed a box of sweet biscuits and a bag of loose tea from the cupboard. The kettle began to whistle its low harmonica note. He poured the steaming water into an oversized cup then spooned in heaps of dark leaves, brewing his tea strong, like the Bedouin had taught him under the shade of an open tent on a blazing summer afternoon in the middle of the desert.

A manila file lay open on the small kitchen table, its contents piled sloppily to one side. Will set down his cup and the box of biscuits, straightened the stray bits of paper, and closed the file, stamped NATIONAL RISK - CONFIDENTIAL across the front. He nudged it to the other side of the table and finished his breakfast.

Will brushed the biscuit dust off his hands and, as had become his habit, tossed his father's stray file on top of a stack on the counter, already a dozen high, where it would likely sit for days. He cleared the table and went to shower.

Steam clouded the small bathroom. His coat still lay crumpled on the floor. Will pulled off his pajamas and wiped a clear circle onto the mirror. He studied his naked body, purple from his hip to his armpit, running his fingertips over the marks until the mirror fogged again, obscuring the damage. Will stood in the shower well beyond his usual ten minutes, allowing the water, clean and hot, to wash away the ache.

He toweled off, dressed, pulled on his coat, and went to collect his things, still at the front door where he left them the day before. He picked up his backpack and

reached for his keys, now buried under another of his father's open files. Will fished out his keys, tidied the papers, and headed for the kitchen to deposit the file with the others.

He dropped it on the pile and opened a cabinet with his free hand while blindly tossing his backpack and keys onto the table behind him. Both hands now free, he opened the biscuit box, stuffed two into his mouth and two more into his coat pocket, leaving the open box on the counter.

He turned to grab his backpack. Another file lay on the table, closed, marked confidential, same as the others except for a large note in his father's tidy handwriting, MISSING - ACT OF GOD.

Will's father wouldn't be out of bed until well after he left for school. He opened the file. A newspaper clipping drifted to the floor. Will picked it up.

### **Provident Museum Shuttered: Owner Declared Dead**

Dorothea Whitford, owner of a museum housing objects of unique and dubious origin was formally declared dead on October 31st. Miss Whitford, missing since a July storm destroyed her home, was in the process of documenting her large and unusual collection at the time of her disappearance. The collection, which included everything from Egyptian corn mummies to an elaborate taxidermy of frogs dancing a cancan, will be liquidated later this

year. Miss Whitford will be eulogized November 1st, 4 p.m., at Twila's Diner, downtown Provident. Apple pecan pie will be served.

A tiny photo of a man standing near the museum's boarded front doors. The caption read, "Timothy Stillman, temporary caretaker, keeps watch." Will placed the article face down on the table and leafed through the rest of the file. He found an appraisal and inventory, dated the week before, and a photo of beat up book with a metal clasp decorated by a rough-cut blue stone.

At the back of the file a communication log noted changes to the insurance policy, the status of the object under investigation, and the initials of everyone who had handled the file. His father had made the last entry, *Sapphire = Raziell?* Will read the note twice.

He tucked the papers neatly back into the file, closed it slowly. He drummed his fingers across his father's note then slipped the file into his backpack on his way out the door.



## CHAPTER TEN

### MANY HOPES LIE BURIED HERE

Will passed through the pale limestone gatehouse of Rosehill Cemetery. He drifted along the edge of a narrow roadway until he reached the heart of the place, where the dense neighborhood beyond the walls ceased to exist and, in the silence of the dead, he could hear the old trees whisper.

He strolled among the obelisks and covered urns, monuments to captains of industry, politicians, war heroes, and plain folk, hundreds of years of life now stilled, at rest. Lulu Fellows read under her tree, sixteen forever. Will imagined her at school, passing notes to friends or, maybe, daydreaming about a boy or a long summer day on the shore of Lake Michigan.

On hard days, Will always found himself in front of the Pearce monument, a young mother followed soon after by her child, lying together in sculpture and in death. He did not have to stretch his mind far to read his mother's name, along with his own, carved into the white stone.

Will tried to recall his mother's smile, maybe from that last day in Jerusalem or maybe some other day, it

didn't matter, but the image kept falling away from him like dry sand through open fingers.

"Mr. Emerson, how are you this fine morning?" said a man's voice, raspy from decades spent drinking cheap whiskey in the smoke of the corner tavern. Will turned to greet the Caretaker. "Oh, dear boy. What's happened to you?"

"Talked too much."

"Well, maybe you should avoid that from now on." The old man cracked a sly smile. "Or get some bigger friends."

"Probably should." Will shook the man's bony hand. "Sorry I couldn't make it for All Souls. Did you have a lot of visitors?"

"No. Not like it used to be. The train used to stop here, you know. Folks used to come and picnic by the pond and visit on special days. Not much anymore. No more train. Just steps to nowhere. No. Not like it used to be." The Caretaker shook his head. "Mr. Emerson, why is it I always find you here?"

"Huh? Oh." Will thought a moment. "It's peaceful, I guess."

"Peaceful? Young man, I think you would be hard pressed to find anywhere in this place that is not."

"Point taken."

"You miss her, don't you? Pond is lovely today. You should have a look. Come. Walk with me." The Caretaker wobbled across the leaf-littered grass. Will followed.

"I think about her all the time," said Will.

"It seems only natural."

"Does it? I'm not so sure." They walked along a curve in the road past a cluster of stone pillars. "I'm beginning to think my father has the right idea."

"How so?" asked the Caretaker.

"He's erased her. Packed away every photo. He never speaks her name. I don't see him for days. There's nothing left to remind him."

"Including you."

"Including me."

They arrived at the pond. It sparkled in the morning sun. Will inched to the very edge, knelt, and swished his hand in the water, already wintry cold. A gust of wind blew a ripple across the surface, distorting the reflections of nearby mausoleums and setting the Canada geese bobbing.

"I told you it was lovely," said the Caretaker.

"Yes. Lovely."

"So, my young friend, what will you do?"

"Ever notice there are no angels here?"

"Can't say as I have." The old man said no more.

The sound of the rustling branches and the honking geese filled the void.

Will stood. "I pray. I pray for her return, I pray for my father to breathe again, I pray for everyone to stop looking at me . . . and . . . sometimes, I pray for Him to take me instead." Will looked out over the pond. "I don't know why I'm telling you all of this."

A shadow fell over Will's feet. He turned to face the visitor, but found no one. He checked his watch and

adjusted his backpack. He would have to run to catch the el in time to make it to school before first bell.

Will barely saw the shadow pass from the trees across the roadway into the heavy stone portico at the front of May Chapel. He strained to see. He looked at his watch again then headed for the small building.

The portico was empty. He didn't expect to find the doors unlocked, but he pulled the handle anyway, nearly losing his balance as the door swung freely. The dim entryway gave way to the soft glow reflected off green and gold tiles at the front of the chapel. Will walked into the light.

"Hello? Anyone here?" He listened intently.

The flutter of wings swept across the darkness of the entryway. Will tiptoed toward the doors, eyes up. A mourning dove swooped low over his head, sending him to his knees. The bird landed on one of the wooden arches. Will picked himself up. "How did you get in here? Hold on. I'll let you out." He opened the door, propping it wide with his backpack. "Okay. Out you go." He took off his coat and waved it at the dove. The bird flew from arch to arch until, ten minutes later, it flew out into the portico. Will grabbed his backpack. The chapel door slammed and the bird flew east into the sun, now high in the morning sky.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# ATONEMENT

The el arrived just as Jordyn reached the platform, leaving her twenty minutes of slush time to kill on the other end in the empty corridors of Eastview. She tidied her locker and looked over her O. Chem. paper. Ten minutes to the first bell and then five more to Geography. She walked, slow as she could, to Professor Embry's classroom.

"Jordyn!" Logan waved her over to join the crowd at the window. She took her seat. "C'mon, put your stuff down and get over here," he said.

"No, thanks."

"Oh, come on," he whined.

Alex, standing on a chair, popped her head above the others. "Gimme those!" She yanked the binoculars out of Mark's hands. "Yeah, looks like Logan's gonna lose his . . ."

"Alex!" Cooper shouted.

Logan stared at Jordyn. "What's the problem?" he asked.

"Me? No problem."



"Then come over here. Should be good today. Wait until you see what Mark planted this time."

"No. Thanks."

Will ran through the door, panting.

Logan sneered. "Lookin' good, Emerson. Maybe you'll mind your own business from now on."

Will opened his mouth. Jordyn's books crashed to the floor and all eyes focused on her. Even the students at the window abandoned their watch.

Logan sat in his seat next to Jordyn and leaned forward in a weak attempt at privacy. "What's the problem?"

"No problem," said Jordyn. "You on the other hand . . ."

"I don't understand," Logan whimpered.

"Well, that's really the point, isn't it?"

"Seriously, come on over. You're going to miss the show."

"I said 'no', thanks."

"I don't get it. Yesterday . . ."

"Yesterday I was curious. But I thought about your little game and, well, it's not very fun. Really, it's just rude. Yesterday I thought you were someone else." She packed her books, walked to the back of the room, and took the open seat beside Will. The students at the window looked at Logan, whispered to each other, and promptly returned to their game. Logan sat at his desk at the front of the room, alone.

The bell rang and the students scurried to their places. Professor Embry flew through the door and began

to speak immediately. "Ladies and gentlemen, we've a lot of material to cover today. Notebooks open, pens up. Today, I'll be telling you all about the political implications of cartography in the 1940s." And he did just that, non-stop until the bell rang fifty minutes later.

Will packed his things quickly and headed for the door. Jordyn followed him out. By the time she got through the door, he was already half-way down the hall. She jogged to catch up.

"Hi, I'm Jordyn."

"Quig. I know." He kept walking. "You didn't have to do that."

"Yes, I did."

Will stopped.

Momentum carried Jordyn a couple of steps past him before she could turn around and continue the conversation. "Have lunch with me."

Will looked at her, bewildered. "What?"

"I'm asking you to have lunch with me."

"That was a question?"

"Sorry. Habit." She cleared her throat. "Would you like to have lunch with me today? How was that?"

"Better."

"So?"

"Uh, sure. Why not?"

"Good. See you." Jordyn turned sharply and continued on her way, leaving him standing in the corridor.

"I'm Will," he called after her.

Jordyn wheeled back around and shot him a sideways smile. "Emerson. I know."

Will walked down the stairs to the first floor past the receiving dock to a door marked "Janitor" in peeling black paint. He knocked and the door gave way.

"Professor Barrett?"

"William, how nice to see you." Barrett poked his head around the door and pulled it open until it bumped against a box on the floor. "I'm afraid the place is still a mess."

"Should I come back?"

"No, no, come in. Students are always welcome here, such as it is."

Will entered the windowless room. It was crammed full with a desk wedged into the corner against a utility sink and already buried in papers and books, an old executive chair, and a single bookshelf. Barrett pulled a card table chair from the clutter, shoving away a box to make enough space to unfold it for Will. "Please, have a seat."

Will sat. "How did you end up in here?"

"No space. It's not so bad. Beggars can't be choosers, right? Anyhow, they tell me they'll have the sink removed and the door fixed sometime next week. If they hadn't contracted out housekeeping I'd be sitting in the hall." Barrett did not smile.

"When do you start teaching?"

"This afternoon, actually. I'll push in to Philosophy for a couple of weeks. After that, I'll be in World

Cultures for the rest of the term teaching a section on religion. Didn't I see your name on the roster?"

Will nodded.

"Now, William - or should I call you Mr. Emerson - what can I do for you?"

"I just came by to say hello." The bell rang. "Sorry, Professor. I have to get to class."

"Well then, you don't want to be late." Barrett took a thick book off his desk and shelved it.

"I love that book. Too bad he doesn't write anymore."

"You read Pritchard? Oh, right, your father. You're in luck, then. I'll be using it for class."

"I actually met him once. I was eight or nine. We had tea at the Albright. He and my father argued about the provenance of some artifact. I can't even remember what it was. I just wanted more biscuits. Dumb little kid. His work is amazing."

"Indeed, it is."

The lunch line was already out the door of the commons. Jordyn leaned against a wall in the corridor. Will jogged toward her. She pointed to the wall clock. Five past twelve.

Will shrugged. "Sorry. Habit."

"Not funny, Emerson." Jordyn brushed past Will. She smelled like white bar soap, clean and comforting. "I'm starving."

Jordyn grabbed a tray and got in line. "Cheese and sausage pizza again? Haven't you people heard of vegetables?"

"Welcome to the Midwest. Come with me." Will led Jordyn past the pizza to a small cooler with pre-packaged sandwiches and cheerful Jell-O cups. "Here, Quig. Turkey on wheat. Looks like there's even a little lettuce." He took two, tossing one at Jordyn. "Heads up." The sandwich nearly fell out of her hand, held up in defense against the flying package. "I'll get some water," said Will.

They paid the cashier and found a small table in the corner of the room. Jordyn unwrapped her sandwich, rearranging the floppy lettuce and a paper thin slice of tomato. Will devoured half his lunch, carefully avoiding the bruised side of his mouth.

"That looks painful," said Jordyn.

"I always eat like this."

"I'm serious."

"Me, too." He winced when he tried to smile. "It's nothing. It'll be gone in a few days. Are you going to eat that?"

Jordyn re-assembled her sandwich, took a few bites, and pushed it away. "It took a lot of courage to stand up to Logan."

"I'm not so sure about that. Seems more like stupidity now."

"You did the right thing. It's too easy to go along, to be who your friends want you to be."

"I wouldn't know."

Jordyn took a sip of water and screwed the top back onto the bottle. "You're lucky," she said.

"You done?" he asked. Jordyn nodded. Will cleared the table, then returned to his seat.

Jordyn leaned across the table and gently touched Will's lip. "I'm sorry. I meant, for me, it can be hard to separate who I am from everyone else's expectations. Sometimes I think it would be easier to be alone."

"Alone." Will sat back in his seat.

"Sorry. Again. I . . ."

"No, it's okay. I understand. Sometimes it is easier to be alone." Will stood. "It's almost time for fifth period."

"Where are you going?"

"Third floor. World Cultures. You?"

"Same."

Will extended his hand. "Wouldn't want to be late."

Jordyn smiled. "How is it?"

"World Cultures? You'll like it. Except for the paper due next week."

"Next week!"

"Don't worry, I'll help. Come on or we'll be late."

After class, the students poured out of the room smelling of tzatziki and wiping powdered sugar off their faces from the cookies they ate while Mrs. Lafayette discussed the finer points of Greek civilization.

Will held the door for Jordyn. "What did I tell you?"

"Cool. What's with you and food?" She gently brushed a streak of white powder off Will's chin. "Still have no idea what to do for this paper, though."

"Doing anything tomorrow after school?"

"I can clear my schedule. Library?"

"I was thinking my place."

"Really."

Will turned pink. "Uh, my father, he has a lot of books. He does this for a living. I mean, he's an archaeologist."

"I see."

"I'm sure the school library has something . . ."

"No. Your place. What time?"

"Five?" Will looked casually at the ceiling, then down the corridor, anything but eye contact.

"Sounds good."

Deirdre Callaghan wound her way through the crowd. Will watched as she moved toward them.

Jordyn kept talking. "Should I bring anything? Snacks or something? Emerson? Hello?"

"That girl with the black hair . . . I've seen her before."

"Deirdre? Yeah, she's a student here."

"Here?"

"Would you like to meet her?"

"What? No."

"Oh, come on, Emerson." Jordyn called out to her. "Deirdre!" She turned, waved at Jordyn, and walked quickly toward them.

Will crossed himself sheepishly, looking down at his unpolished shoes.

"Deirdre, this is Emerson – I mean, William Emerson," said Jordyn.

"Nice to meet you, William." Deirdre smiled softly.

"Uh, 'Will' is fine. You're Irish," said Will.

Deirdre and Jordyn exchanged a look. Deirdre took Will's hand in both of hers and shook it warmly. "Of course. Will."

Will felt the pink rise in his cheeks again. "Sorry, have I seen you somewhere before?"

"You have."

Will opened his mouth to speak. The bell interrupted.

Jordyn reminded him of their plans. "See you tomorrow, Emerson."

"Yeah. I mean, yes. Absolutely." Will motioned over his shoulder. "I'm headed that way. Nice to meet you, Deirdre. I, uh, I have to go. See you later, Quig." Will turned and retreated down the corridor.

"See you, Emerson," called Jordyn after him. She and Deirdre snickered and headed the opposite direction. Will looked over his shoulder. The girls chatted, heads together. Deirdre turned back toward him and smiled.





## CHAPTER TWELVE

### CLEAN

It had been days since Timothy Stillman packed up his truck and left the comfort of Provident. From time to time he stopped to eat or to rest, but mostly he drove, taking the long way back to the city. The thumping of washboard grooves along the side of the dark highway startled him from his half-sleep. Tired and hungry, he checked into the nearest and cheapest motel he could find.

The lobby vending machine would have to do until the complementary breakfast. "Served 6 AM to 9AM," the clerk explained. "Don't be late. They take it all away right on the dot and you'll miss it if you're a minute past. Alarm clock's on the nightstand."

Stillman stood before the machine and considered his options. He pulled out his wallet, empty except for a single wrinkled dollar bill, an OTB receipt, and a check for ten-grand, made out to him, dated six months earlier. The machine rejected his dollar twice. Stillman tucked it back into place and pocketed his wallet, the appeal of peanut butter and imitation cheese crackers not tempting enough to warrant a third attempt, not even on an empty stomach.

He wished the clerk a good night and walked to his room a few doors down the hall. He dropped his duffel bag on the foot of the bed and tossed his keys onto a small desk with a miniature coffee maker, a thin bar of hand soap, and a brochure with a watercolor portrait of Abraham Lincoln on the front. *Welcome to Ottawa, Home of the Lincoln-Douglas Debates.*

Stillman leafed through the brochure and dropped it on the nightstand next to the alarm clock. He sunk onto the edge of the worn mattress and kicked off his boots. The dingy teal bedspread invited sleep despite its disagreeable color. Unpacking nothing, he crawled under, pulling the covers close around his unshaved chin. He clicked off the lamp and slept off and on until the late morning light sliced through a crack between the stiff vinyl curtains.

Stillman crawled out of bed, pulled a toothbrush from his bag, and dragged himself to the bathroom, not bothering to look in the small mirror mounted above the vanity. He had missed breakfast.

He re-packed his toothbrush then fumbled with the coffee maker. He ripped open the complimentary packet of coffee, nearly losing the grounds to the olive shag. He snapped the carafe into place, switched the machine on, and waited for the aroma to fill the room.

Stillman guzzled a cup of weak coffee and dumped the rest, collected his things, and checked out. He plugged his phone into the charger in his truck and merged onto Interstate 80. He settled behind a slow moving minivan, camping gear loosely bungeed to the

top, clean Starved Rock bumper magnet on the dirty liftgate, kids' eyes glued to the DVD.

Two hours later, he arrived on the north side of Chicago and collected a thick bundle of mail from the local post office where, he swore, the clerk snarled at him as she handed it over.

Stillman circled the block near his apartment twice before he found a spot big enough. He grabbed his mail and his bag and walked down the street.

The sensor on the door of his neighborhood mini-mart bing-bonged as he swung open the door. The store was empty of customers. The clerk greeted him from the storeroom door. "Afternoon, mister." His accent was thick and his English broken, but he seemed eager to chat. "Help you, mister?" he offered.

"Just grabbing a few things, thanks." Stillman gathered a small bag of coffee, white bread, packing tape, and a quart of milk.

"Good weather today. No rain, only sun."

"Yeah. It's good." Stillman dropped his items on the counter. "This'll be all." He paid with a credit card.

"Nice day, mister." The clerk pulled out a paperback and a dictionary and sat down behind the cash register.

"You, too." The door sensor bing-bonged as he left for home.

Stillman walked carefully down the mossy steps in front of his garden apartment. He dropped his duffel bag on the ripped couch inside the front door. He took the rest to the kitchenette. He tossed the mail onto a second-

hand bistro table. His stained mug still sat upside down in the plastic dish drainer on the counter. He unpacked his mini-mart bag, put a pot of coffee on to brew, and sifted through the envelopes, most marked "confidential" or "past due" or both.

The yellow box of sugar had solidified in his absence. He chiseled out a couple of good-sized lumps with a butter knife and doctored his coffee the way he liked it. He took a slow sip then went to his bedroom.

His laundry hamper bulged. He pulled the sheets off his bed and stuffed them into the flimsy basket. He dragged it to the front door, pulled the clothes out of his duffel bag, and piled them on top. He hauled it all across the courtyard, down to the coin-op laundry room in the apartment opposite his. He spent the next two hours washing, drying, folding, thinking.

When he returned to his apartment, the sun hung low in the sky. He made the bed and left the rest of the clean laundry folded in the hamper. He went to pour himself another cup of coffee. His mobile phone rang, number unknown. Stillman answered the call.

"Where are you?" the voice on the other end demanded.

"What?"

"Are you in the city?"

"Yes," answered Stillman.

"You were supposed to deliver it by now. You have the money. There's another ten for you when I get it. You need the money and I need the package. I need it! Don't you understand?"

Stillman did not speak.

The voice softened. "Look, a man like you could clean up a few messes with twenty grand. That's what you want, isn't it?"

Stillman frowned. "I'll call you when I get settled."

"Fine. But, don't take too long." The line went dead.

Stillman looked at his phone. "Why does every conversation with you end this way?" He tossed the phone hard onto the counter. The battery cover popped off and skittered across the kitchen floor.

Stillman dug a suitcase out of the coat closet, packed away his clean clothes, and zipped it shut, leaving it next to his duffel bag at the door. He went back to the kitchenette to finish his coffee. He sat at the wobbly table, picking at his unopened mail then went for carry-out at the Thai place around the corner.

After dinner, he shaved and showered. He made his bed and slipped between the fresh sheets. He reached for the lamp, hesitating before turning the switch. He pushed his covers away and jogged to the front room. He rummaged through his duffel bag and pulled out the small brown-paper package and Dotty's bible, running his fingers along the deckled edges of the bible's pages as he walked back to his room. He sat on the side of his bed and read the passage marked with the blue ribbon. He laid the bible and the package on his nightstand, crawled back under the covers, and turned off the lamp, sleeping soundly for the first time in months.

Morning came too soon. Stillman stumbled to the kitchenette and reheated a cup of stale coffee in the microwave. He popped a couple slices of bread into the toaster and picked up the pieces of his phone. He shut off the ringer and put it in a drawer. The toaster began to smoke. He rescued the too dark bread, scraping it over the sink until it seemed edible. He finished his meal, cleared the envelopes from the table, and stashed them in the drawer with his phone.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### THE STUDY

Jordyn ran home after school. She changed out of her scratchy uniform into Levi's and a white t-shirt, plain except for the word 'maybe' in clean letters written across her chest. She threw on her favorite leather jacket and her new sunglasses and headed for the el. She arrived on Will's doorstep at five sharp and rang number two.

"Jordyn?" answered Will.

"Expecting someone else?"

"I'll buzz you in. We're on the second floor."

"Number two. Think I got that."

The lock clicked open. Will waited on the landing, still in his school uniform. He watched Jordyn come up the stairs. "Wow, not what I expected."

"Did you think I'd show up in a prom dress or something?"

"Or something. Nice shades."

"Like 'em? They're Italian. From Rome. My father's idea of a souvenir."

"Come in. Let me take your coat." Will took her coat and disappeared down the hall, returning a couple of

minutes later with a large book in his hands. "Study's this way. Follow me."

Will sped down the hall to a cozy room lined floor to ceiling with mahogany bookshelves except for one wall, papered in maroon and gold stripes. A pair of well-worn leather armchairs flanked a side table with a small reading lamp. Somewhere among the books, a carriage clock tick-tocked softly. Will laid his book on one of the chairs and motioned to the other. "You can put your stuff there. Hungry? I'll go grab a snack. Be right back."

Before Jordyn could speak, he was gone. She tossed her backpack beside the chair and dropped her sunglasses on the table. Two diplomas hung high on the bookless wall, one a Master of Philosophy in Archaeological Heritage and Museums, the other a Doctorate in Archaeological Studies, both granted to William Robert Emerson, Sr., both with the four-lion crest of Cambridge. Below the diplomas hung a few framed photos of a light-haired man standing in the desert and below the photos several vivid rectangles where the wallpaper had been protected, unfaded behind whatever was there before.

An open box full of framed photos sat on the floor. Jordyn pulled one off the top. A woman beamed at the camera. Jordyn recognized her thoughtful brown eyes and dark hair. She took another out of the box. A young boy and his family enjoyed tea under the shade of a palm in a walled garden.

Will returned, two cups in his hands and a box of biscuits tucked under his elbow. The bright smell of lemon followed him in.



Jordyn held the photos in her hands. "You moving?"

"No. Why?"

"The pictures."

"My dad took them down when we got back. He didn't want any reminders."

"Reminders? Of what?" asked Jordyn.

"I thought you knew. Doesn't everyone?"

"Newbie here, remember?"

"Oh, right. It's a long story."

"I'm listening."

"Um, well, it's my mother. She's . . . she disappeared," said Will.

"My mom took off when I was two. It's been me and my dad ever since. I don't get it. How do they just leave like that?"

"No. She didn't leave. I meant she was . . . abducted."

"I'm so sorry."

"Yeah. So's everyone. It's okay. Really. I shouldn't have told you."

"No. I'm glad you did." Jordyn pulled out another photo of a young family in the middle of a crowded plaza.

"The woman in the photos, she's your mother?"

"Yeah. That's Manger Square. In Bethlehem. We were visiting some of my mother's family at Christmas. A few of them still live near there."

"In Israel?"

"No. West Bank. They're Palestinian Christians." Will squeezed the cups onto the small table.

“Just like in your photo. The tea, I mean.”

“It’s okay, isn’t it? I got used to tea over the summer. I forget I’m here now. I can get some water.”

Jordyn curled into the soft leather chair. “No, it’s nice.” Jordyn sipped her tea, amber and sweet-tart. “Deirdre invited me for elevenses; not this Saturday, but next. Elevenses is tea, isn’t it? You should come.”

“Me?” Will shoved a biscuit into his mouth.

“Is there someone else in the room?”

Will shrugged.

Jordyn shook her head. “We’re meeting at a place called Molly’s. It’s only a few blocks from here. Have you been?”

Will took his cup and hastily washed down the biscuit. “No. But, I . . .”

“You’re coming. I’ll meet you here at ten-thirty.” Jordyn took another sip of tea. “How long were you abroad?”

“My parents started taking me on their digs when I was seven. I’ve been every summer since. Mostly Israel.”

“My dad travels all the time and I never get to go.”

Will wiped his hands on his pants. “We should get started with your paper.”

“Right. Paper.” Jordyn pulled a thin laptop from her backpack and booted it up.

Will watched the machine come to life. A photo of Jordyn and her father standing on a beach filled the screen. “Nice wallpaper. Are you wearing a wetsuit?”

"That's how I spend my summers. My dad tried to teach me to surf. I sucked, but I totally miss it."

"Totally, dude."

"Emerson, are you mocking me?"

"Yes, Quig. I am." He smirked as best he could without re-opening the gash on his lip. "It's dark in here. I should turn on some lights." Will pulled the chain on the lamp. "Now we can . . ." he paused, staring at Jordyn. "Your eyes."

"Oh, no!" Jordyn's hands flew up to cover her face. "My lenses were bothering me. I didn't put them back in."

"Wow, your eyes are really not brown."

Jordyn lowered her hands. "I know," she said.

"They're . . ."

"Jade green."

"And?"

"Always a gamer around until you need one." She sighed. "Serendipity green. My dad gave her my eyes."

"Oh." Will pulled a wood TV tray from behind the study door. He opened it in front of Jordyn. "For your computer."

Jordyn set her laptop on the small table. "Thanks."

"I think they're much better on you," said Will.

"Thanks, Emerson." Jordyn stretched and pulled Will's book off the chair. "Sit." She looked at the cover of the book, cocked her head, then looked at Will. "*Ancient Cult Objects*. Interesting." She leafed through. A manila folder fell to the floor. "What's that?"

"Nothing." Will grabbed the file, folded it in his arms, and sat. "Just something I was working on."

"Do you always work on things marked confidential?"

"Well, it's not really mine. It's my father's. He investigates missing artifacts for insurance companies. He specializes in cult objects."

"Cult? You're starting to creep me out a little, Emerson."

"Um, sorry, 'cult' is archaeologist for religious stuff like icons, fertility figurines, grave goods, really anything to do with belief systems."

"So, what's so 'cult' about this one?" asked Jordyn.

"Maybe nothing. It's just a book. The clasp has a sapphire. That's probably why the insurance company wants to find it," said Will.

"But, you don't think that's it."

"Did I say that?"

"You still have the file."

"Yeah. I guess I do." Will pulled out the photo of the book and handed it to Jordyn. "The book was in a museum in a small town. There was a storm. It ripped up the main street and took out some houses. It was pretty bad. Anyway, the collection was being appraised at the time and the only thing missing . . ."

". . . was the book," Jordyn finished his sentence.

"Yeah."

"And that bothers you."

"That, and someone assigned it to my father for a reason."

"So, what do you think it is?"

"If it is what I think, then we shouldn't be messing with it." Will looked at the front of the file. "I should put it away. There really isn't anything to do. My father's note says the case is closed. 'Act of God', see?" He pointed to the note on the front of the file. "Anyway, I'm not even supposed to have it."

Jordyn sat forward on the edge of her chair. She studied the photo under the lamplight. "Look at this. Is this writing?" She pointed to the stick-like figures etched into the metal ring around the stone.

"Probably." Will took the photo from Jordyn and tucked it back into the file.

"Don't you want to find out if you're right?"

"It's not mine," said Will.

"You can't just leave it at that. It would kill me not to know."

"I can see that." Will thought for a moment. "There is one person who may be able to help."

"I'm game. When do we go?"

"It'll have to wait. We're off next week for Veteran's Day. We can go then, in the morning. It's not far from school."

"Meet me at my house. We'll go together."

Will nodded. "We should get back to your paper. Can I have my book?" Jordyn handed it to him. He tucked the file back into its pages, closed it, and laid it on the floor next to his chair.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### THE KEY

Will sat on the el headed south. The Veteran's Day holiday left the train mostly empty, even during the morning rush. He pulled Iain Pritchard's book out of his backpack and opened it on the vacant seat next to him, the file still in place.

He skimmed chapter twelve until he came to the paragraph he sought. He vaguely mouthed the words as he read, "Even today, people continue to rely on the spiritual. For instance, reprints of the *Sefer Raziel HaMalach*, also known as *The Book of Raziel*, are kept in many homes as a talisman against fire. The modern book is said to have been transcribed from the ancient text which was, as legend tells us, written on a sapphire."

The train began to slow. "Next stop, Fullerton. Fullerton is next."

Will closed the book and jammed it back into his backpack. The doors opened. He jogged down the stairs and exited the station. He stood on the sidewalk below the tracks and dug Jordyn's directions out of his pocket.

*Fullerton to Halsted and Lincoln. Slight right on Lincoln. Right on Orchard (across from the children's hospital). Middle of the block, right side of the street.*

He began to walk. The November wind bit at his cheeks. He shoved his bare hands deep into his coat pockets and picked up his pace.

Will stopped in front of an ornate limestone rowhome, middle of the block, right side of the street. He climbed the broad stairs and rang the bell.

Jordyn opened the door, already in her coat. "You look a little cold. Want to come in for a minute?" Will nodded, rubbing his hands together.

Jordyn led him up a flight of dark-stained wood stairs and down a hall past the dining room where an oversized iron chandelier hung over a long table. A rustic fireplace dominated the wall opposite the room's doorway. Freshly chopped wood lay neatly stacked on the clean stone hearth. They kept walking.

Jordyn showed Will to the kitchen. The room filled the back half of the house, cabinets ornate and appliances large.

"Can I get you some cocoa or something?"

"Sure. Thanks." Will laid his backpack on the polished granite counter with care and eased onto a barstool.

Jordyn prepared a cup and handed it to Will. He wrapped both hands around it, allowing them to warm before taking a sip of smooth chocolate.

"So, who is this person we're meeting?"

"Iain Pritchard. And I wouldn't say we're meeting. More like popping in."

"Pritchard? The guy who wrote your book?"

"Yeah. He used to teach at DePaul. He lives in Lakeview."

"You know him?"

"Sort of." Will changed the subject. "I brought the book. There's not much information, though."

"You think Pritchard can tell us more?"

"If anyone can, it would be him." Will chugged the rest of his cocoa. "We better get going."

Jordyn and Will took the el to Belmont. They walked a few blocks west under leafless parkway trees. They passed Eastview and walked another block before heading north on a quiet street lined with old bungalows and apartment buildings of all shapes. They stopped at a brick courtyard building. The bare branches of overgrown shrubs crowded the edge of the concrete walkways.

Will double-checked the address. "It'll be in front." He walked to the first entry door on the right and pressed the intercom button labeled '2D'. A sharp voice with an English accent crackled through the box, "Yes?"

"Sir, my name is Will. I'm a student at Eastview."

"I don't take visitors." The line disconnected.

Will rang again.

"I told you I don't see anyone," came the response.

"Sir, if I could have a minute."

"Please, go away!" The line clicked twice then went dead.



Jordyn stepped up to the intercom. "How rude."  
She laid on the buzzer.

"What do you want?"

Jordyn used her best 'dinner with Dad's colleagues' tone, respectful and polite. "Sir, we need to ask your opinion. It will only take a minute."

"I said 'no'. Just go away!" The sound of a dial tone rang out of the brass box before it went silent again.

Jordyn searched the ground around the shrubs lining the foundation of the building, collecting anything that might hit a second story window without breaking it.

Will watched her scour the courtyard. "I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"Why not? He can't hang up on us through the window. We need his help. A minute or two. That's not too much to ask." With a fist full of stones and twigs, Jordyn positioned herself toward the front of the building. She took aim with a small pebble. It bounced off the glass with a weak ping. She sorted through the bits.

"Here's a good one." She held it up for Will to see.

"Besides, no one hangs up on me like that." She lobbed a hunk of mulch, hitting her target with a dull thud.

Pritchard did not come to the window. Jordyn chucked another pebble. No response. Curious neighbors peeked through their mini-blinds.

Jordyn paused, carefully selecting her ammunition. The rock landed with a loud chink. The window flew open.

"What do you want?" hissed Pritchard.

Before he could send them away, Jordyn shouted, "Dr. Pritchard, we know who you are and we need your help."

Will stepped forward and held up his book. "It'll only take a minute."

"Fine. A minute." Prichard relented and buzzed them in.

Jordyn and Will climbed the stairs to 2D. Pritchard opened the apartment door. He wore an immaculate navy suit with a maroon tie. A black umbrella stood in a bronze stand just inside the door. Jordyn glared at Will.

Pritchard motioned them in and closed the door behind them.

He was a young man, maybe thirty, but the weariness in his posture, in his every motion, betrayed disgrace and, when viewed from a school window, made him seem much older.

Pritchard looked them over. "What did you say your names were?"

Will spoke first. "Jordyn Quig and William Emerson, Jr."

"Emerson? Safa and William? I knew them."

"Yes, sir. My parents. We had tea at the Albright once. I was younger then."

Pritchard's face dropped. "So was I. A lifetime ago, it seems." He offered Will and Jordyn a seat on a tidy sofa in the sitting room just off the entryway. On the coffee table, a small crystal bowl held foil-wrapped toffees piled so neatly they formed a perfect four-sided pyramid.

Prichard sat in a wing chair. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, resting his chin lightly on his folded hands. "You have my attention."

Jordyn looked at Will. "Show him. Show him the file."

Will retrieved the file and handed it over. Pritchard leafed through the articles and the updated appraisal. He pulled out the photo of the small book, examined it for a moment, then slipped it back into the file and handed it back to Will. "What do you think it is?" Pritchard asked.

"I'm not sure," answered Will.

"Then why come to me?"

Will looked at Jordyn. She nodded. "I think it might be something in your area of expertise . . . something sacred."

Pritchard leaned back in his seat.

Will continued, "You mention a book in chapter twelve, but only in one paragraph. I was hoping you might be able to tell us more about *The Book of Raziel*."

"Hmm." Pritchard popped out of his seat. "Come." He slid open a heavy pair of pocket doors, closed them, and slid them open again. He walked into the room.

Will and Jordyn followed him to the doorway of a small library. Stacks of books, some waist-high, others to the shoulder, covered the floor and the desk and chairs, leaving the shelf-lined walls behind them barely visible. Jordyn muttered under her breath, "More books."

At first glance, the books appeared to be randomly arranged, but on closer inspection, the stacks were alphabetized starting with 'A' nearest the right door jamb

and concluding with 'Z' at the left. At 'M', on a shelf of its own, a small Marshalltown trowel stood on end, embedded in the wood tip down.

Stopping in the center of the room, Pritchard turned a slow circle, tapping his index finger on his chin in the kind of thoughtful gesture expected of a man of his intellect. Will and Jordyn exchanged a puzzled glance.

Pritchard skipped toward the tallest stack in the room. Jordyn watched him run his fingertips along the spines of the books, moving swiftly from one stack to the next. His hands were slender and neatly kept, but not delicate. Every knuckle was scarred. On his right hand he wore two rings, both silver, heavy, and without stones, their carved patterns softened by wear.

Pritchard passed nearly all of the books. Pausing somewhere near 'S', he closed his eyes. Jordyn looked at Will; he shrugged.

Pritchard put his hand to his forehead, turned sharply, and walked directly to the books nearest the doorway. He removed half a dozen and pulled a thin, navy blue book from what was now the top of the stack. Several pages had been marked by different colored scraps of paper, each one filled to the edge with tiny handwritten notes. Pritchard cradled it gently. He ran his index finger down the gold lettering on the spine as if reading by touch. Turning the book face up, he opened it to a page near the middle, marked with goldenrod.

Pritchard scanned the text systematically until several pages later he paused to read. "Hmm." He turned two more pages and continued. "Hmm."

Jordyn couldn't stand it any longer. "What is it?" she asked.

Pritchard continued without taking notice. "Hmm."  
"What!" Jordyn repeated.

Pritchard did not look up from the book. He paraphrased aloud, "According to legend, *The Book of Raziel* was written by the Archangel Raziel, also known as the Angel of Secrets. The book is said to contain all of the Wisdom of Heaven, some of which was not even revealed to the other angels. It was given by Raziel to Adam in the Garden of Eden. As the story goes, the other angels were so jealous, they stole the book and threw it into the sea. Adam eventually got it back. Later, it was given to Noah and he used it to build the Ark and eventually it was passed to King Solomon who used its knowledge to build the Temple in Jerusalem. The book was handed down for generations, though secretly." He clapped the book shut. "Essentially, it is a grimoire."

"A what?" asked Jordyn.

Pritchard raised his head and looked at Jordyn. "A grimoire. And one of the most ancient and powerful."

Will explained, "A grimoire is a collection of incantations, enchantments, formulas."

Jordyn scowled. "Magic?"

"Yes and no," said Pritchard. "Think of it as knowledge." Pritchard returned the book to its place, and went on, "To some, electricity is magic, but to us it is just a product of knowledge. It simply depends upon your perspective." Pritchard directed Will and Jordyn back to

the sitting room. He closed the library doors, opened them, and closed them again.

Will and Jordyn took their seats on the sofa. Pritchard stood behind the wing chair. He folded his arms across the high back. "If a grimoire is a book of knowledge, then this is *the* book of knowledge," he added. "God's knowledge."

Will's eyebrows knitted. "Even if it were authentic, only an adept would be able to use it, right?"

"One would assume it would require some experience to use it properly. And a crossroads would be important."

"A crossroads?" asked Jordyn.

"Yes. In this case, a church would be most likely," said Pritchard.

"A church?" said Jordyn.

"Yes, Miss Quig. Crossings serve as amplifiers and the floor plans of most churches form . . ."

". . . a cross." Will completed the sentence.

Pritchard nodded. "Even so, the text is supposed to have been written in a language so arcane that only Raziel himself would be able to decipher it, and on a stone, at that."

Jordyn sat on the sofa and crossed her arms. "You saw the photo. God's knowledge?"

Pritchard chided, "Miss Quig, certain things exist regardless of what we believe ought to be. There is virtually no information regarding the physical appearance of the book. If I am correct, I think this may be more valuable than anyone at the insurance company

suspects. To them, the stone is simply a bauble they need back to reconcile their books. To them, the rest is insignificant.”

“So you think this actually might be *The Book of Razel*?” asked Will.

“I think your father might have been onto something. The stone is certainly a step toward that conclusion. Can you find that photo for me again?”

Will shuffled through the papers and handed the photo back to Pritchard who examined it closely. “Look.” He turned the photo toward Will and Jordyn. “See the markings around the stone? What do they look like to you?”

“Stick figures?” Jordyn snickered. Pritchard frowned. Jordyn shifted in her seat.

Will came to her aid. “They look runic to me.”

“Mr. Emerson, you are nearly correct. This is Ogham.”

“Ogham,” Will muttered to himself.

Pritchard continued. “Some have hypothesized the written form of the language was developed as a cryptic system, originally used for secret messages of a political or religious nature . . . and for magic.”

“But, it’s too recent,” said Will.

“Scholars agree it probably originated in Ireland around the fourth century of the Common Era; not nearly as ancient as one would expect on an object of this sort. Nonetheless, the inscription is curious.”

“What does it say?” asked Jordyn.

“Essentially, it says ‘faith is the key’. Pity you don’t have the book itself. But then, that is probably for the best.” He returned the photo to Will. Pritchard walked to the window and looked out over the lifeless courtyard. “An object like that would bring an immense sum. Can you imagine?” Pritchard laughed sharply then suddenly grew quiet. “But of course, its true value is in the power of the knowledge it holds. One could achieve wondrous things, truly wondrous. However, used with malice, it has the potential for utter devastation.” He ran his finger along the top of the window sash and blew a bit of dust into the air.

Will packed his backpack, took Jordyn by the elbow, and escorted her to the front door. “Thank you, Dr. Pritchard. We have to go now. You’ve been very helpful. Thanks again.”

Will and Jordyn shook Pritchard's hand. "We'll show ourselves out," insisted Will and they left the building.

Jordyn stopped outside the entry door, scowling at Will. "What's going on?"

"Nothing. We got what we came for. We should leave."

They walked out of the courtyard. Pritchard watched from the window of his apartment.





## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### MISTAKEN

Will tossed in his bed unable to let go of Iain Pritchard. Around three he gave up on sleep and forced himself out of bed for a cup of tea. The study door was closed, but a sliver of light cut into the dark hallway. Will stood outside the door. He heard the faint shuffle of papers then his father picked up the phone and dialed. Will listened as he wished the person on the other end a good morning in Italian and asked for someone in the antiques department.

Will stumbled down the hall to the kitchen, relying on dim streetlight and body memory to find his way. He switched on the light over the stove and twisted the knob for the largest burner. The gas hissed for a second until the pilot caught. Blue flame billowed from beneath the kettle. Will leaned against the counter waiting for the water to boil. The stack of his father's files cast a tall shadow on the kitchen wall. Will turned off the stove and went back to bed without his tea.

Will didn't want to leave his warm blankets. He pressed the snooze alarm one time too many. He showered and dressed quickly, tucking in his shirt on the

way to the kitchen. He pulled on his coat and wadded his uniform tie into a ball, pushing it into his pocket. He slung his backpack over his shoulder, inhaled a biscuit on his way down the back steps, and ran for the el.

Will made it to Geography just as the first bell stopped ringing. Logan sat at the front of the room, arms crossed, glowering. Jilly twisted her gum around her finger and stretched it out in a droopy pink strand. Copper stared at the door. Jordyn leafed through her textbook.

Will sat down at his desk and leaned toward Jordyn. "What's with them?"

Jordyn whispered, "Pritchard. He didn't show up. Do you think it had to do with yesterday?"

"No. How could it?" Will un-crumpled his tie and put it on best he could with no mirror. "How's that?" he asked Jordyn.

She straightened it for him. "We told Pritchard we were from Eastview."

"What difference would that make?" Will dug his textbook out of his backpack and opened it to "Mapping in the 21st Century." He skimmed the chapter.

"I don't know. None, I guess," said Jordyn.

"Anyway, it's over."

The second bell rang. Professor Embry burst through the door. "Always a glorious day to learn about mapping! Books open, please."

The period dragged. When the bell finally rang, the students tripped over each other racing for the door.

Jordyn and Will packed their things and walked out together.

"I need to go see a Professor before next period," said Will. "See you at lunch?"

"A professor? Uh, yeah, sure. See you at lunch." Jordyn watched him vanish into the crowd.

Will stood outside Professor Barrett's office. He knocked lightly on the glass. "Professor?"

"Yes. Come on in," said Barrett.

Will pushed the door. It swung wide, no box to block the way. Barrett hung up the phone. "Voicemail again." He neatened his inbox, taking a letter off the top.

"Looks like you've settled in," said Will.

"Yes, indeed. Please, have a seat. They gave me some real furniture." Barrett pointed to a plastic chair. "At least it doesn't fold up. I hear my door is next on the list for the maintenance crew." Barrett laid the letter in the top drawer of his desk and closed it, locking it with a small key. "So, Mr. Emerson, is this another social call?"

"Have you ever heard of *The Book of Razel*?"

"I see. Right to the point."

"I only have a few minutes between classes."

"Yes, of course. I understand." Barrett forced a smile. "I have read about the book. Why do you ask?"

Will handed Barrett the file. He shuffled through the contents. "Where did you get this?"

"My father keeps his work files at home. It's his."

"You took it?" asked Barrett.

"Well, I . . . I just haven't put it away yet. The case is closed. You can see on the front."

"I see." Barrett closed the file and handed it back. "Will, *The Book of Raziël* is a sacred thing. I doubt it would be on display in a small town museum like some sideshow."

"I went to see Pritchard yesterday," said Will.

"Iain Pritchard?"

"Yes. He lives near here. I thought he might be able to tell me about the book."

"You are full of surprises this morning. What did he have to say?" asked Barrett.

"He thinks it could be authentic."

"He does?" Barrett leaned back and folded his hands under his chin. "And you?"

"I don't know. It could be. The sapphire and the inscription . . ." Will's eyebrows knitted.

"And if it were? What would you do if you found it?"

"Me? Nothing. Hand it over to the insurance company, I guess."

"And your father?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Your father. What do you think he would do? After all, it is his file."

"It's his job to find it. Anyway, the case is closed."

"Will, a book like that is not to be taken lightly. It holds power beyond our comprehension."

"Pritchard made that clear yesterday. Made me a little uncomfortable."

"How so?"

"He seemed . . ." Will paused to choose his words carefully. "Well, he seemed a unstable. I think the mix-up with that artifact really affected him."

"I'm not at all surprised. He lost his job. It destroyed his reputation."

"My father said it was a mistake Pritchard never would have made."

Barrett leaned forward, elbows on his desk. "We all make mistakes, Will. You should return the file."

The period bell rang.

Will tucked the file into his backpack. "I should go."

"See you at Vespers this evening?"

"Oh, right, Wednesday. Uh, yeah, see you tonight, Professor."



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### THE MESSENGER

Every Saturday morning Timothy Stillman walked to the local coffee house for a double shot of espresso, cream and lots of sugar, no matter the weather. He had missed this habit while he was away. The neighborhood was always quiet, even more so when the temperature dropped near freezing. On his way back, he passed a young woman jogging, alongside her a Golden Retriever. No one else braved the chill, even on such a sunny day.

Stillman unlocked the door to his apartment, only a little warmer than the outside. He set his coffee on the kitchen table next to a manila envelope and peeled off his winter coat, still musty from being unused for months. He draped the coat over the spare chair and sat to enjoy his drink. Squares of mid-morning light coming in from the garden windows at the top of the front wall of his apartment checkered the living room carpet.

The intercom buzzed. Stillman got up to answer. "Yes."

"Messenger," came a young man's voice.

"Be right there." Stillman retrieved the envelope from the kitchen. He cracked the door open. The

messenger held out a paper and a pen. Stillman took them and put the paper on top of the package, filled in the empty line, and signed. He handed everything to the young man and closed the door. Stillman could see the messenger's ankles walking past his garden windows. The building's apartment manager, wearing worn out sneakers, slouchy Christmas socks, and too short yoga pants, came into view. The messenger stopped. The two pairs of ankles faced each other for a moment then left in opposite directions.

Stillman went back to his table, sat and put his feet up on the extra chair. He lifted his cup to his lips. The intercom rang again. Not expecting more visitors, he grudgingly put down his coffee.

"Yes,?" he answered.

"Messenger."

"Your guy just picked up the package."

"You sure?"

"He was just here. I'm surprised you didn't see him."

"Hold on. Let me call my dispatcher," said the man.

"Fine, but your guy just left with the package."

Stillman leaned against the wall on one elbow, looking at the intercom as if it were speaking to him. He tapped a finger on the answering button.

The messenger buzzed again.

"Yes," said Stillman.

"Sir, my dispatcher's telling me I'm the only one they sent. Are you sure it was one of our messengers? Because once I leave, man, I'm gone. I got another ten

stops before I'm done and there're only a couple of us working today."

"I swear, one of your guys was already here. Anyway, the package is gone. There's nothing for you to pick up."

The messenger's ankles cast a shadow across the floor of the apartment as he walked past the garden windows and out of the narrow courtyard. Stillman walked back to his table, sat, raised his cup to his lips, and took a long sip.

He finished his drink and tossed the empty cup into the trash. He dug his wallet out of his pocket and removed the cashier's check, smoothing it flat in his hands. He laid it in the middle of the table. He opened a drawer near the sink and collected an envelope, a pen, and a stamp. Without sitting, he addressed the envelope, inserted the check, sealed it, and carefully placed the stamp in the upper right. He put on his coat and tucked the envelope into the breast pocket.

The mug in the dish drainer was still damp. He dried it on his pants and took it to his bedroom. His suitcase lay open on the undressed bed, Dotty's bible on top of his possessions, packed in neat rectangles. Stillman tucked the mug into a corner and zipped the suitcase closed. He wheeled it out the front door and locked his apartment, dropping the keys in the small metal box on the wall near the apartment manager's door.

He stopped at the front of the building and deposited the envelope into the outgoing slot in the big silver mailbox he'd passed everyday for nearly five years. His



truck was parked half a block down. The suitcase wheels clunked over the cracks in the sidewalk, steady and predictable, and Timothy Stillman allowed simplicity to fill him up.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### ELEVENSES

Jordyn got off the el and walked a block and a half to Will's building. Her breath made cloudy puffs in the air, somehow out of place in a clear blue morning. She buzzed Will's apartment. He answered before she could take her finger off the button.

"Be right down!" Will popped through the door.  
"I'm ready."

"How long were you waiting there?"

"Huh?" Will played dumb.

Jordyn sniffed at his collar. "You're wearing cologne." She looked him over. He wore dark blue jeans and black leather oxfords, recently polished.

"What?" he said.

Jordyn smiled and shook her head. "Come with me. It's not too far." She and Will walked down the street.

Will followed her to the middle of the block on the east side of Clark Street. Every storefront was a slightly different shade of brick, weathered brown or red or beige. Except one.

Jordyn stopped in front of a narrow, wood-paneled façade, painted glossy black. The tall windows were

divided into twelve, the gold painted muntins twinkled in the bright morning. Gold leaf lettering on the wood sign swinging above their heads read, "Molly's Irish Pub and Inn." The words encircled a three-pointed knot. The glass in the top half of front door was gilded "Céad Míle Fáilte."

Jordyn looked at Will. "Can we go in there?"

"Why not? This is the place, right?" He did not wait for Jordyn to respond. "Come on. I'm freezing out here." He lugged the sturdy door open.

They entered the dark space. The smell of fresh baked bread and fat sausages welcomed them. Animated conversations filled the room with the melody of Irish brogue, clanking plates and busy forks providing the rhythm.

Deirdre waved them down. "There you are!" she said and took them both by their elbows. "Let me show you Molly's."

The pitted wood floors gave slightly with a tactile creak under foot. Deirdre led them past a stage and a long bar with glasses hanging overhead, past dinged up wood doors set like tabletops on whiskey barrels and old steamer trunks and deep booths upholstered to the ceiling in black leather tufted with brass tacks, past the closed glass doors of a library lined with bookshelves crammed full of bottles, past a room with one large dining table and blocky, tall-backed chairs with ochre-colored velvet seat cushions and illuminated by a rusty iron chandelier that looked as if it were about to bring the plaster ceiling crashing down. She led them past the frenzied kitchen,

and finally, at what must have been the very back of the building, she led them into an empty room with dartboards on one wall and an old bellows on another.

Deirdre stood in the middle of the room smiling and a little out of breath. "So, this is Molly's. We should find a table up front." She turned on her heel and left the empty room.

Jordyn shrugged. Will smiled and they ran to catch up, following her back to where they had started.

Deirdre settled into a leather booth across from the bar, her back to the door. "Here, this'll do." Will slid in next to her. Jordyn sat opposite, across the wide table.

A young woman stood at the bar. Long wheat-colored hair, held off her round face with a thin purple headband, reached the middle of her back. Jordyn watched it swish back and forth as she talked with a scruffy, middle-aged man behind the bar as he absently dried beer glasses with a flour sack. The man winked at Jordyn. She turned her attention back to Deirdre and Will, scootching down in her seat.

Deirdre looked at the man at the bar and shook her head. "I want you to meet some friends," she said and hopped out of the booth.

She walked directly to the bar. A few moments later, she returned with the young woman who was neatly dressed in black pants, a crisp pink shirt, and a spotless white apron. The gentle curves of her face and kind expression lent her an extraordinary tranquility.

The man stashed the towel behind the bar and followed, moving with unconcerned confidence. The

shallow cleft in his chin was still visible through two days' stubble. The lobe of his left ear sagged under the weight of a chunky earring. He grinned and his dusty blue eyes were surrounded by deep laugh lines.

"Jordyn and Will, this is Devin and Tierney. Jordyn and Will are my new friends from Eastview."

Devin waved, her hand small and plump. Tierney crossed his arms and leaned back. He eyed Deirdre.

"You'd be wise not to get involved with this one." He let out a loud guffaw.

Deirdre smirked. "Tierney harasses me every time I come here."

"Devin tries to keep me in line, but it's a tough job," said Tierney.

"You know it," retorted Devin. Her accent was American and, although she spoke with deliberate clarity, each sound practiced and precise, her words were soft and round.

"Devin keeps us all in order around here. We'd be completely lost without her," said Tierney.

Devin giggled. "You're just trying to get on my good side."

"Nice to meet you," said Jordyn. Will nodded.

Devin grinned at Jordyn. "What beautiful hair. I always wanted strawberry." Devin's eyes sparkled, dark blue flecked with white.

"Thanks," said Jordyn.

Devin's watch beeped. "It's time. Wait here." She disappeared down the dark, wood-paneled hallway at the back of the room.

"Tierney, has Oisin been in?" asked Deirdre.

"I saw him earlier. Devin sent him out for something. Not sure what," said Tierney.

Devin returned with a tarnished silver tray of mismatched cups and saucers, a nested stack of heavy spoons, and a plate of small pastries. The tray clattered as she plopped it onto the table. "I'll be right back." She vanished again, returning quickly with a steaming pot of tea, a small pitcher of milk, and a glass bowl filled to the rim with sugar. She set the teapot at the center of the table and arranged the milk and sugar, one to either side of the teapot. She poured each cup half full. "That's better." She stepped back to admire her work.

"Thanks, Devin," said Deirdre.

Devin pulled a bar towel from her apron and wiped a couple drips of tea. "Okay. Back to work for me. Tierney?"

"Ah, back to work for us." They returned to the bar, Tierney to his polishing and Devin to her chatting.

The front door opened. A young man in a black hoodie stepped through the morning light, stopping just inside. He scanned the room. His ice-blue eyes caught Jordyn. She looked up at him and her mouth curved into an unconscious smile. She watched him cross to the bar where he stopped to talk with Devin.

Will interrupted. "Quig?"

"Huh?" said Jordyn.

"I was telling Deirdre about the file and about what Pritchard told us."

"The file?" Jordyn shook herself back into the conversation at the table. "Uh, yeah, the file. I'm still not convinced stuff like that actually exists. Seems like a serious leap to me."

Deirdre fixed herself another cup of tea. "You should never underestimate the power of faith. Sometimes that is all you need."

Will leaned back in his seat and watched Deirdre pour in the milk which roiled up below the surface like the clouds before a summer storm.

Devin nodded toward their table and the young man looked over again. He pushed his hood back onto his shoulders. He had a boyish face, his skin creamy pale against his short cropped auburn hair. He nodded at Devin then walked toward the table.

Deirdre looked toward the bar. "Oisín!" She jumped out of the booth and wrapped her arms around him. He was about their age and not much taller than Deirdre. She dragged him back to the table. "Will and Jordyn, this is my dear friend, Oisín."

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "Hello." The palest of freckles dotted his face.

"Hi," said Will.

Deirdre offered Oisín a seat. "Join us?"

"No, sorry. I have to go out again. Busy today," his brogue rich and warm.

Deirdre frowned. "Oh, too bad. Another time, then?"

“Another time. Nice to meet you.” Oisín's eyes lingered on Jordyn, still smiling involuntarily. She turned to watch him leave through the back of the room.

Will raised an eyebrow at Deirdre. He reached across the table to touch Jordyn's arm.

Jordyn turned around. "Huh? Sorry. Did you say something?"

"Deirdre was just telling me there's going to be a ceili the week before Thanksgiving."

"A what?" Jordyn tried to catch up.

Deirdre laughed. "A ceili. Think of it as a big Irish dance party. You and Will should come." She picked up her cup. "Drink your tea. It'll be getting cold by now."

After tea, Will walked Jordyn to the el station. "You're still smiling," he said.

"What? I am not. Am I?"

"You are."

"Well, that was nicer than I thought. The tea, I mean."

"It was."

Will opened the door to the station beneath the tracks. Not far away, the train clattered.

"Better get up there. They don't run very often on weekends," said Will.

"See you at school, Emerson." Jordyn pushed through the turnstile and sprinted up the stairs.

Will headed for home. When he reached the door, the mail carrier was just leaving. "Couple of letters for your dad today, Will," she said.

"Thanks. You're early."



“Little bit. See you Monday. You have a nice day now,” she called out, already halfway to the next address.

Will took the letters upstairs. He laid them on the credenza with the rest of the unopened mail. The apartment was quiet. He went to his room, flicked the light switch, and picked up Pritchard's book. He flipped to the back and removed the file. Thumbing the corner, he walked it to the kitchen and placed it on top of the stack.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### THE SAPPHIRE BOOK

Wednesday morning. Will walked into geography just before the last bell. At the front of the room, Logan and Alex compared notes. Jilly tapped the chewed end of a pen on her desk. Will took his seat unnoticed. Jordyn had her head buried in a book. He leaned toward her. "He didn't show again?"

"Nope." She looked up and nodded toward Logan. "Half of them didn't even get here early."

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. After school, Will met the mail carrier at the door. She handed him one letter wrapped in an ad from the local carpet cleaner. He dumped the ad in the recycle bin below the mailboxes and carried the letter upstairs. The pile of mail on the credenza was beginning to overflow the edges. Will took a handful to the kitchen table. He dropped his backpack near the back door and sat down to sort the pieces by urgency. The ad for satellite television and a renewal notice for *Biblical Archeologist* went to the bottom, the letter from National Risk to the top. Utility bills were opened and stacked by due date, leaving for last a well-sealed manila envelope. Will picked at the edge of

the packing tape, bits of it broke off under his nails. He took the package to the study. His father kept scissors in the side table.

Will sat in one of the armchairs. He opened the scissors wide and, with one blade, slit the tape at the top of the envelope. He turned the package open side down and shook. A small leather-bound book landed face down in his hand. He tossed the envelope onto the top of the already full trash can. The book, heavy for its size, fit comfortably in his palm. Dust had settled in the stitching and folds of the binding. Will tightened his fingers around the edges. Something cold and sharp pressed against his skin. He turned it over.

The book was held closed by a metal clasp decorated with scratchy letters and a single rough-cut stone of deepest blue. Will ran his fingertips over the hard edges of the dime-sized sapphire. He pinched the clasp open, pulling it gently so as not to break the old pins inside. It slipped apart without resistance. Will opened the book. Its pages fell open to a note tucked a few pages inside the front cover. The handwriting was tidy. *Dr. Emerson, I think this is what you are looking for. Forgive me for not returning it sooner. TS*

Will turned a page, then another, and another until he reached the back. Every page was blank. He closed it and fastened the clasp. The carriage clock on the shelf chimed four. Will bolted to the kitchen and retrieved the file he had returned a few days before. He slid the sapphire book and the file into his backpack, shouldered it, and ran out the kitchen door.

The el rattled overhead as it entered the station. Will waved his pass at the turnstile sensor, pushed through, and ran up the stairs to the platform. He threw his body between the closing doors of the nearest car, squeezing his way onto the train. He braced himself against the pole nearest the door and rode there until the doors opened at Belmont. Will ran down the stairs and kept running for blocks, not stopping until he stood inside Iain Pritchard's apartment.

Pritchard handed Will a glass of water. Will took a sip and set it aside, still breathing hard. "I need your help. I need more information. About the book."

"I'm not sure there is much more I can tell you, Will." Pritchard tapped his index finger on his chin. "I may have one more reference. Wait here." Pritchard opened and closed the library doors twice then disappeared into the room.

Will called from the sitting room. "Dr. Pritchard?"

"Sorry? Had my head buried," came Pritchard's muffled voice.

Will went to the library doorway. "I was just wondering . . ." his voice trailed off. The books were no longer visible, every surface hidden by thousands of small brown paper bags on the floor, pinned to the walls, taped to the windows.

Pritchard's head popped up on the far side of the room. "Sorry for the mess. I've been working." Each of the bags had been tagged. *Bottle cap (domestic), 4 September, 08:14, Eastview. Bent key ring, 31 October,*

08:32, Eastview. *Pink gum (chewed)*, 4 November, 08:25, Eastview.

"Uh, I was just wondering how you would know for sure if something was real." Will pulled his backpack onto his shoulder and held the strap tight to his body with both hands.

Pritchard poked at the bags. He pulled one out and re-filed it in a stack at the center of the room.

"Archaeological context, carbon dating, and so on. There are a number of ways to authenticate an artifact. Surely your father would have taught you that." He snapped up another bag and examined its contents.

"Yes, of course. But what if there isn't any of that?"

"Then you learn what you can and you hypothesize until you have more information." Pritchard stood very still. The brown paper bag fell out of his hand. "Where is it, Will?"

"What?" Will stepped back.

"You've found the book, haven't you?"

"No. Not really," Will answered honestly.

"Where is it?" Pritchard snarled.

"It's safe." Will's knuckles turned white.

"Will, it is not a toy."

"I know."

"That book, it's meant for . . ." Pritchard's brows furrowed. He folded his arms and turned his back toward Will. He looked up and down his wall of bags then spoke slowly, "I'll ask you one more time, Will. Where is the book?"

Will stepped back again. "It's safe."

“How can you be expected to protect it? You’re only a boy.”

“I know what it can do.”

“Do you?” Pritchard’s voice began to sharpen. He wheeled around to face Will. “Do you have any idea what it is like to have your honor . . . to have *everything* stolen from you? Do you!”

Will stepped back again. “I . . . I don’t think it’s authentic. The pages . . . they’re all blank.”

Pritchard looked at the bags taped to the window, blocking out most of what little daylight remained. He whispered to himself, “He opened it. How? It’s supposed to be impossible to unlock.” He glared at Will. “What did you do? You must tell me! Exactly! Is it still open?”

“I . . . I didn’t do anything.” Will held the strap of his backpack tightly. “I should go now.”

“I don’t think I can let you go just yet. I need that book.” Pritchard rushed across the room and lunged at Will, knocking him to the floor. “Stand up!” Pritchard growled.

Will stayed down, glowering.

“Stand up!” Pritchard grabbed Will by the arm and forced him up. He dragged Will into the library and, with both hands, pulled him so close he could feel the heat coming off Pritchard’s contorted face.

“Where is it!” Pritchard screamed desperately. The sweat from his brow splashed onto Will’s cheek.

Will tightened his mouth. He tried to pull away from Pritchard.

Pritchard's expression softened. "Don't you understand? A book like that could set things right."

Pritchard looked down at his fists as if they belonged to a stranger. He opened his hands and stumbled back, scattering the bags like fallen leaves.

"Will, I'm so sorry." He looked around the library. "I have to fix this. I know you will do the right thing." Pritchard sunk to his knees in the middle of his brown paper sea.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### VESPERS

Will ran out of Pritchard's apartment and took the first train north. By the time he reached his stop, the sun had set. His coat offered little protection from the cold November evening and, even though the walk from the el station to St. Ita had been only a few blocks, the chill found its way to his bones. Will settled into the pew under Ita's window and rubbed his hands together until he could once again feel his fingers.

Will reached into his backpack, blindly hunting for the book. He pulled it out, held it between his hands, and prayed, mouthing the words, giving them physical form, if only for an instant.

The church door slammed. An old man with thinning hair at the crown of his head sat directly in front of Will.

"Cold out there. Needs to snow," said the man.

Will inched away down the pew.

The man continued, "Yep. Snow." He crossed himself and knelt, saying a quick prayer. He pushed himself back on his seat. "Bad for my knees, all this



cold.” He twisted his body around and slung an elbow over the back of the pew.

Will closed his eyes, hoping the man would give up on a conversation.

“See you here every Wednesday. I across the way. Felt like a little change tonight. So nice to see young people at church.”

Will opened his eyes. He offered an obliging smile. The man turned forward. “Oh, looks like Deacon Barrett is out. Poor man. Sometimes it gets to him, the cold. That's when it happened, you know.”

Will leaned forward. “When what happened?”

“So, you do speak.” The man turned back around. “Course, he doesn't like to talk about it. Thinks he failed that little girl. Oh, it's been years now.” The old man dug out a white cotton handkerchief he'd stashed in his shirt pocket. He covered his mouth and coughed hard like old men do. “He nearly died, you know, trying to save her. But, sometimes there's just nothing to be done. Some things are meant to be. Told me he never wanted to see that look her father had at the funeral ever again. I think he honestly hates those people for pulling him out that pond. Such a shame.” At the front of the church, the priest began to sing.

Barrett twisted the knob on the radiator to full open. He curled up under the quilt on his bed, chin to his knees, and he prayed to stay awake until his body would no longer be denied. His dream swallowed him whole.

Snow blanketed the quiet schoolyard in a pillowy layer, undisturbed except for the footprints of one small animal. The overnight storm had given way to a clear morning, the sky saturated a blue only achieved in the stark contrasts of winter. The cross atop the neighboring church cast a sharp shadow. Around the playground, a waist-high wrought-iron fence stood guard, black and severe against the undulating snowdrifts piled against it. A cardinal nibbled the last of the berries on a nearby shrub. Down a low hill, a half-frozen creek chattered in the cold air.

The nun ticked off her roster while her assistant, a young seminarian, held open the side door of St. Anne's Catholic School, releasing a torrent of chirping six-year-olds, reveling in their long awaited freedom, kicking up joyful clouds of snow.

The nun called after the children, "Remember, only fifteen minutes, boys and girls. It's still very cold." The children scattered.

At the end of recess, the seminarian counted heads. Thirteen, fourteen . . . no fifteen. No Mary Catherine. The young man called her name. He ran to the opposite side of the jungle gym. "Mary Catherine," he called again.

The other children lined up by the door to go inside. A pair of tracks, rabbit and child, disappeared over the snowdrift near the gate at the far side of the playground. Beyond the low ridge, a pale pink hat with a white pom-pom bobbed up and down. The seminarian ran, calling the little girl's name.

By the time he reached the creek, the rabbit was on the opposite side digging for hidden bits of green. Halfway across, on the edge of a stationary chunk of ice, was the pale pink hat with a white pom-pom.

Barrett followed the edge of the creek downstream to where it flowed into a pond. Mary Catherine clawed at the ice, crying for her mother. Barrett screamed, “Don’t be afraid!”

The girl disappeared into the water and drifted under the ice. Barrett ran across the frozen pond sweeping the snow away until he found her. Mary Catherine’s loose hair fanned out around her sweet, still face. Barrett took off his shoe and hammered at the ice with all his strength. A crack began to form. “Thank God!” And then he fell into the cold and the dark.

They recovered Mary Catherine’s body three days later. Barrett, released from the hospital a day before, attended her funeral Mass where the priest reminded everyone about the light she’d brought into the world. Her father followed the small casket out of the church, his expression hollow, his heart empty.

The radiator hissed. Barrett woke and wiped the tears off his face. Outside, the snow began to fall.



## CHAPTER TWENTY

### DIVING

Will left the apartment early on Thursday morning. The roads and monuments of Rosehill were clean, already warmed enough by the sun to melt away winter's first snow. Will had grown accustomed to these deceptively sunny days, but was always unprepared for their bitter flawlessness, finding no comfort in the beauty, especially so early in the season. He wrapped his scarf high on his neck, pulled his knit hat low over his ears, and made his way to the Pearce monument. Their white stone bed rose out of the snow like a crystal sprung up from bedrock, solid and immovable.

Will pulled the book out of his backpack and pinched open the clasp. He turned the blank pages then closed it and held it to his heart, praying hard in the midst of the dead.

An hour later, he walked into Geography, fifteen minutes late and soaked to the knees. Professor Embry worked down the list of talking points in his slide presentation and, without missing a beat, said, "Nice of

you to join us, Mr. Emerson. Please, open your textbook and follow along.”

Will dropped his backpack beside his chair and slunk into the seat. Jordyn showed him the page they were on. He reached for his backpack, knocking it over into the aisle, spilling its contents out onto the floor. The book slid under Jordyn's feet.

She hissed, "Emerson! Is that it? That's it, isn't it!" She picked it up.

"Shhhh." Will snatched it out of her hand, pushed it into the bottom of his backpack, and got out his textbook and some notepaper.

"I can't believe this. How long have you had it?" Jordyn whispered.

Will put a finger to his lips.

Jordyn scowled. "When were you planning on telling me?"

Professor Embry stopped his lecture in mid-sentence. "Miss Quig, care to share?"

Several students turned toward the back of the room. "Sorry." Jordyn slumped down in her seat.

Will scribbled on the corner of his notepaper. He tore off the message and handed it to Jordyn. *Courtyard after class.*

She wrote below, *SEE YOU THERE*, then crumpled the note and pitched it back at Will. She crossed her arms and re-focused her attention on the front of the room.

After class, Jordyn and Will walked down to the courtyard without speaking.

Will hugged himself. "It's freezing out here."

"It is, isn't it," said Jordyn. She crossed her arms and waited for Will's explanation.

"I've only had it since yesterday. I found it after school."

"Can I see it?"

Will turned his back to the courtyard windows and moved close to Jordyn. He pulled the book out and handed it to her. She held it near her face, squinting to see the marks around the stone. "It looked bigger in the picture. Are you sure this is it?"

"Everything matches the file, but I can't tell if it's real. Not for sure."

"Where did you find it?"

"It was mixed in with my father's mail. I always sort through it for him."

Jordyn ran her fingertip over the stone. "Do you think your dad would be able to tell if it's real?"

"Maybe. But . . ."

"What about Pritchard?" asked Jordyn.

Will's brows furrowed. "I went to see him yesterday, after I found it."

"And?"

"I don't think he can help us."

"Did you show it to him?"

"No. I didn't get a chance. He . . . attacked me."

"He did what?"

"He came at me. Knocked me down."

"Why would he do that?" asked Jordyn.

"He made a mistake with some paperwork and it cost him everything. I think he would do anything to get his life back and the book . . ."

". . . would give him what he wants."

"If it's real," said Will.

"Right. That." Jordyn paced a few steps. "Maybe the person who sent it could tell us more. It came wrapped, didn't it?" Will nodded. "Was there a return address?" asked Jordyn.

"I didn't really look."

"So, where's the wrapper?"

"It was an envelope. I threw it away."

"Then it's still at your place."

"Not exactly. I took out the trash."

Jordyn sighed.

"But the City doesn't pick up garbage until tomorrow," Will added quickly.

"And that helps us?"

"We'll just have to go in after it. Meet me after last period."

"That is not exactly how I envisioned my afternoon, Emerson."

"C'mon, where's your sense of adventure?"

"I think it left when you said garbage."

Jordyn flipped the book right side up, pinched the clasp, and pulled. "It's stuck."

"That's funny." Will took the book. "It opened for me this morning. It's an old lock." He stashed the book deep in his backpack. "It doesn't matter. I don't think this

book will be showing anyone how to build an ark. The pages are blank. Anyway, it doesn't work."

"You tried to use it?"

"I . . ."

"For what?"

"I . . . if I could get her back . . ."

"Your mother?"

"I . . ." Words failed him.

Mrs. Hansen tapped on the courtyard window.

Jordyn waved her off. "She probably thinks you're dealing. We better get inside."

They left the courtyard. Jordyn took Will by the arm and led him to an out of the way corner in the corridor. "Promise me you won't do anything with that thing until we know more about it. I swear, Emerson, I won't let you go until you do."

Will raised his right hand. "I, William Emerson, Jr., solemnly promise . . ."

"Not funny. Come on, we're late," said Jordyn and she dragged him down the corridor.

Jordyn met Will after school and rode the train home with him. The dumpster at the alley was wedged into a narrow enclosure. It overflowed with garbage bags covered in half-melted snow. Will stood on tiptoes, poking around the top. "It'll be in this dumpster. It has to be near the top."

"And I thought I wouldn't find anyone interesting in Chicago."



"There. I see it. Against the back. That clear bag." Will stretched as far as he could. He looked around the alley for a crate or an empty paint can, anything to stand on. The alley was surprisingly clean. He stretched again. "I can't reach it."

Jordyn took off her coat and scarf. She folded them neatly and set them on the driest spot she could find.

"Okay, Emerson. Give me a boost."

"You sure?"

"We need that envelope and I can't lift you. Besides, this uniform could use a little character, don't you think?"

Will boosted Jordyn up. "You smell nice," he said.

"Not for long." Jordyn kicked her legs over the edge of the dumpster and waded across. "Where is it?"

"There." Will pointed to the other side. "At the back, toward the middle."

"Got it." Jordyn ripped open the top of the bag and pulled out the manila envelope. She frowned. "There's no return address."

"It must have come by messenger."

Jordyn waded back to the front of the dumpster and tossed the envelope to Will. "Get me out of here."

He lifted her out and picked up her coat and scarf. "You're soaked. Come on." They went up the back stairs. Will unlocked the kitchen door and let her in. "Wait here."

Jordyn stayed just inside the door not wanting to spread the smell of garbage any further than necessary. Will returned with sweats and a plastic bag. "Put your uniform in the bag. I think you can make this stuff fit. I'll

look for some safety pins or something. At least they won't kick you off the el."

Will left the room and Jordyn changed into his clothes. They hung off her body, but they smelled like fabric softener and that was much better than the dumpster full of who knew what. She put her uniform, sealed tight in the plastic bag, on the back porch.

Will set the kettle to boil. "Tea?"

"Sure. I think I've developed a habit. I never drank so much tea in my life."

"It'll be a minute. Sit down."

"Now what?"

"I still have the file. Maybe there's something there. I'll get it." Will dug it out of his backpack.

"You're walking around with that, too? I'm beginning to think you might need some help," said Jordyn.

"You're probably right. The note inside the book . . ."

"The note? What else haven't you told me, Emerson?"

"Nothing. That's it. You would have seen it if the clasp had opened. Anyway, the note had the initials *TS*." Will leafed through the file. "Here. *TS*. Timothy Stillman, the caretaker of the museum." He handed the newspaper clipping to Jordyn. "Maybe he can tell us what's going on. How many Timothy Stillman's can there be in Provident, Illinois?"



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### CEILI

Will sat on the steps in front of Eastview, thankful for a Friday. The last of the fall leaves collected at the bottom in papery curls, undampened by the previous day's snow. A banner announcing the annual formal hung above the school doors.

Jordyn came around the corner. "Emerson! What are you doing here? First bell doesn't ring for another five minutes." She shot him a sideways smile. "Did you get your invitation?"

"For what?"

Jordyn pointed up the stairs. "For that."

"Oh, that," said Will.

"My dad's buying a table."

"Haven't seen anything," said Will.

"It doesn't matter. You're sitting with us. It's at the Field this year. You'll need a tux. I'm sure my dad's tailor can set you up."

"Thanks. But I already have one. A tuxedo, not a tailor." Will stood, not bothering to brush off the back of his pants.

Jordyn stepped back and looked at him, his uniform blazer faded and his trousers frayed at the heel. "No way."

"Yes way. My father drags, well, he used to drag me to university fundraisers. The pants are probably too short now. Maybe your father's guy can do the alterations."

"Emerson, I am truly shocked."

"Why?"

"I don't know. It just doesn't seem like your thing."

"There's a lot you don't know about me, Quig."

"Such as?" Jordyn prodded.

"You still coming over before the Ceili tonight?"

"You're changing the subject."

Will smirked.

She squinted at him then conceded. "Yeah, I'll be there at five."

"Good. I found a phone number for Stillman."

"You think it's our guy?"

"We'll see. Do you think we need to dress up for tonight?"

"I'm not. But Deirdre will be there, so you can."

"It's not what you think," said Will.

"Whatever you say, Emerson." The first bell rang. Will held the door and they went inside.

When Will got home, the mail carrier was still stuffing the boxes. "Just one today." She handed him an oversized ivory envelope, the Eastview crest letterpressed

on the flap at the back. Will took it inside and opened it at the kitchen table.

*Eastview College Preparatory Academy  
Presents  
The Annual Black and White Ball  
Scholarship Benefit*

*Saturday, December 20th  
7pm to Midnight  
The Field Museum  
Dinner and Dancing  
Formal Attire*

Will left the invitation on the table and went to shower. He dressed in jeans and his nicest sweater.

Jordyn arrived precisely at five. Will buzzed her in.

He led her down the hall to the study. "We can call from here."

Jordyn took off her coat and draped it over the back of one of the armchairs. She wore a snug black t-shirt with a small rhinestone circle at her breastbone.

Will looked her over. "You sure you won't be cold?"

"I told you, Emerson, jeans and a t-shirt. I'll be fine. I'll take a cab home." She picked up the phone. "Where's the number?"

"I don't know if we should do this," said Will.

"Do you want to know if this thing is real, or not?"

"Of course I do. But then what?"

"I don't know. Give it back to the insurance company. It's probably nothing, anyway. Just an old book with a nice rock. Are we doing this or not?"

Will nodded. Jordyn took the paper, found a pen, and dialed.

A woman answered, "Twila's. This is Sadie. How may I help you?"

"Sorry. I must have dialed the wrong number. I'm looking for a Mr. Timothy Stillman."

"Mr. Stillman isn't here. Might I ask why you're calling?"

"My name is J-Julie Smith. I'm a reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*. Just following up on a story our paper did a few months ago. The one about Mr. Stillman and the museum."

"Oh, yes. I remember that," said Sadie.

"Yes, well, we'd like to interview Mr. Stillman to find out more about his experience since then. We think it would have real human interest appeal."

Will crossed his arms and stood back to watch Jordyn's performance.

"Would you happen to know how I could reach Mr. Stillman?" Jordyn continued.

"When I said he wasn't here, I meant to say he left town some time ago. He went back to Chicago. That's where he was from. Dotty had him come do an appraisal of all her museum stuff so she could update her insurance. Been a while since she had all of it accounted for. Anyhow, that was before she, you know, before she died." Sadie's voice wavered.

"I read about that. I'm very sorry for your loss."

"Oh, listen to me. I still get so upset. Dotty was very dear to us all."

"I'm sure she was."

"And Mr. Stillman, bless his heart. He stayed to clean everything up after the storm. Make it proper."

"Yes, and we'd really like to tell the story. It's very important that we get in touch with Mr. Stillman. Without him our hands are tied."

"Well, I normally wouldn't give out anyone's phone number, but since you're with the paper I think that would be okay. Are you ready?"

"Yes, thank you. Go ahead." Jordyn wrote the number. "Thank you very much, Sadie. You've been very helpful."

"Don't mention it. Mr. Stillman deserves to tell his story. He tried so hard to protect Dotty's. Everything went up for auction not too long ago. Dotty didn't have any heirs. The whole place was sold to some museum up in Canada. Shame, isn't it?"

"Yes. Yes, it is. Thanks again." Jordyn disconnected.

Will applauded. "Brilliant!"

Jordyn bowed. "Why, thank you. Unfortunately, we still only have a phone number. She said he was only there to do the appraisal. He left after he was done. I guess he lives in the city." Jordyn re-cradled the phone and put her coat on. "Ready?"

By the time they got to Molly's, the place was already bustling. On stage, a band played an energetic Irish reel. The fiddle player stomped out the beat, raking his bow across the fiddle with such ferocity it seemed as if it would turn to sawdust in his hands. Small girls with huge mops of curly hair congregated nearby, their dresses decorated with knots and birds and lions in violet and emerald and canary. Their hard shoes clacked on the wood floor as they stomped out the beat waiting for their turn under the lights. Spectators in front of the stage chatted loudly with the strangers all around them as if they'd know each other forever.

White candles in every shape and size lit the room, casting a golden light that flickered brightly off the newly polished silver. Sprigs of holly decorated the tabletops. Christmas was around the corner.

Servers rushed past, their trays heavy with stews and big glasses of foamy stout, expertly balanced. They called everyone by name. Will smiled at Jordyn.

Deirdre pushed toward the door. "Will! Jordyn!" Oisín followed her. "You remember Oisín?"

Jordyn nodded. Will shook his hand. Deirdre took their coats.

"So, what, exactly, happens at a ceili?" Will asked.

The fiddle wailed on. "Rowan plays like the devil, don't you think?" said Deirdre. "Come on." She hung their coats on pegs in the hall and led them deep into Molly's, back to the room with the ochre chairs which were now lined up against the walls. The table



overflowed with crusty loaves of bread, boiled potatoes, roasted birds, and puddings in shapes fancy and plain.

"First, you eat," said Deirdre. So they filled their plates and found a table. They ate and talked and laughed and went back for more.

Will pushed his plate away. "I'm stuffed." Jordyn looked at him sideways. "What? It happens. Sometimes," he said.

A middle-aged man with a white apron at his waist cleared the table. "Thanks, Brendan," Deirdre called behind him. "The ceili dances won't be starting yet. The dart room is empty. Want to play?"

"I've never played," said Jordyn.

"I'll teach you," said Oisín. "We'll play as a team, against Will and Deirdre."

Deirdre hopped out of her seat. "Okay, then. Let's go."

"We'll play three-oh-one. No double-in," said Oisín. They walked to the back of Molly's.

Jordyn looked at Will. "Any idea what he's talking about?" she asked. Will shrugged.

"It's simple," said Oisín. "We start at three-hundred-one points and count down. The spaces on the dartboard are marked. You just need to add."

"And know how to throw darts," said Will.

"Don't worry. It's easy enough," said Deirdre.

They entered the room. Oisín gathered the darts. He handed three to Jordyn. "Stand at the line." The black mark on the floor consisted of tape adhesive and dirt. "Now, aim for the center."

Jordyn let the dart fly. It landed in red, near the seven. She threw two more.

Deirdre clapped. "Very good. You did double-in. Our turn." She handed Will three darts. He threw. The first landed in the wall.

"Aim for the *center*." Jordyn reminded Will.

"Got it." He crinkled his brow in concentration and scored a total of two.

Oisín threw three quick darts and scored twenty-two. Deirdre, six. Jordyn, nineteen.

"I thought you hadn't played before, Quig," said Will.

"She's a natural," said Oisín.

"Yeah, right," grumbled Will. He scored seven, his third dart bouncing off the chalkboard where they kept score. He shrugged at Deirdre. "I'm not sure we'll ever get to zero."

The gap widened with each turn.

On stage, the band played tune after tune, traditional and not, each more vibrant than the last. Deirdre poked her head out of the room. "Looks like the party's moving to the front. It's almost time for the ceili dances. We should call it a game."

Will sighed. "There is mercy."

Deirdre took Will's hand. "Always."

The four of them found a place amongst the crowd in front of the stage. In a gravelly brogue, the fiddle player announced the ceili dance. "We'll be starting with the "Siege of Ennis." Most of you know it. If you don't, just follow along best you can."

The music started. The dancers formed lines and skipped forward and back and through each others' arms, always leaving Jordyn a step or two behind. At the end of the dance, she fanned herself with both hands. "I need some water."

Oisín took her hand. "Come with me."

They found an empty booth tucked into the corner of the room. On three sides, it was paneled floor to ceiling in rough-hewn pine. Thick velvet curtains hung down the sides of the open end. Inside, the sound of the crowd, though they were very near, faded to a low murmur.

"Wait here," said Oisín.

He returned with two glasses of water. They sat and caught their breath. On the index finger of his left hand, he wore a pewter ring with an intertwining knot at the center of a circle.

"That knot, on your ring. It's the same as on the door," said Jordyn.

Oisín looked at his hand. "It is. I've had it a long time."

"What does it mean?"

"It's an ancient symbol. Some say it represents past, present, and future. And the circle, it represents unbreakable unity." Oisín reached across the table and traced the rhinestones on Jordyn's t-shirt.

The band stopped playing. The fiddle player spoke. "We'll be taking a break, now. I'm told the dining room table is still full of good food. Enjoy! We'll be back shortly." The party guests, and the noise, migrated down the hall.

“Would you like more to eat?” asked Oisin.

“I’m not really hungry. But you should go. If you want.”

“No. Thanks. There’ll be plenty left for later.”

They sat together in the quiet room until Jordyn slid out of the booth. She smiled sideways then half-skipped to the front of the stage. She climbed up and sat on the edge, feet dangling. Oisin followed, stopping squarely in front of her. He put his hands in his front pockets and shrugged.

Jordyn laughed. “That dance was fun. Maybe next time I won’t trip over everyone else’s feet so much.”

“It’s easy once you get the steps.” Oisin lifted her down from the stage and went behind the bar to turn on some music. When he returned, he led her to the center of the floor, stepped a few feet away, and turned to face her. “Now, follow me,” he directed. “You’ll be holding hands with the person beside you. Like this.” He held his hand up near the side of his face and took the hand of his imaginary partner. Jordyn snickered then straightened up and mirrored his movement.

“OK, now. Listen for the beat.” He counted down, “Four, three, two, advance, advance.”

Jordyn stutter stepped to catch up. They skipped toward each other.

“Retreat, retreat,” Oisin called. “Again.” They skipped forward and back. “Now side step, side step, hold, hold, side step, side step, advance and turn.” The music stopped. They finished the last steps of the dance

to his call. Oisín applauded his approval. "And I still have all of my toes."

The band took the stage. The drummer beat a large, flat drum cradled in his arm, the rhythm slow, the sound deep. The fiddle began to weep.

A few people trickled in from the dining room, quietly settling at tables or standing at the bar.

"I guess we're done," said Jordyn, looking for an empty table.

Oisín held out his hand. "May I?"

Jordyn smiled. "Why not?"

Oisín wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her close. A woman began to sing, her voice fragile against the haunting melody.

"What is this song?" whispered Jordyn.

"*The Wexford Carol*. It tells part of the Christmas story. The angels appear to the shepherds. The shepherds are afraid. The angels tell them to go to Bethlehem where a blessed child has been born. So they go and, in great joy, find their Messiah as had been foretold."

They danced to the rest of the song, its story unfolding in music, until the room was again quiet.

Deirdre and Will came down the hallway, heads together, chatting like best friends. "There you are," said Will. "Thought we lost you. I have our coats. It's late, we should go."

Jordyn stepped away from Oisín. "Thanks for the lesson."

Oisín smiled warmly. "I'll walk you out." The band began to play a raucous pub song. The four of them

pushed through the crowd out onto the street in front of Molly's.

The sky was clear and black.

Jordyn hugged herself. "It's so cold in this town."

Will looked at her. "Told you." Will giddily went on, "but, the upside is that Quig has learned to make a perfect cup of hot cocoa."

"Now you're just giving me grief, Emerson."

"No. It's true."

Jordyn grinned at him. "It is pretty good if I do say so, myself."

Oisín chimed in, "Humble, isn't she?"

"Have you met this girl?" said Will.

Jordyn sneered. "I work at it, you know. It's the best . . . I'm telling you."

"That sounds worth trying," said Oisín.

"Okay, no need for you to get smart, too," said Jordyn.

"Honestly, I'm not," said Oisín.

She looked him over. "You really aren't, are you? Okay, I'll play. Wednesday after next? After Thanksgiving."

"I'm game," said Will.

Deirdre interrupted. "Will, you promised to help me with that essay that week." She glared at him.

"Oh, right. Sorry, Quig. Busy."

"Guess it's just me then," said Oisín.

"Okay. How's eight?"

"Perfect." Oisín stepped into the street and hailed a cab. He held the door as Jordyn climbed into the back seat of the yellow sedan.

"Get in, Emerson. I'll drop you on the way."

Will jumped in and closed the door. Jordyn gave the driver directions and the cab pulled away. She looked out the window. "The stars are bright tonight."

"So what was that all about?" asked Will.

"What?"

"I don't know. You. Oisín."

"Nothing."

Will watched her looking up at the sky.

"Stop looking at me like that," said Jordyn. "It's nothing."

"Whatever you say, Quig."

"Me and guys are definitely not a good idea."

"What about me?"

"Oh, don't be a goof. You're different."

"I'm beginning to feel a little hurt." He stuck out his lower lip in an exaggerated pout.

"Stop it."

He pushed his lip out more. Jordyn slugged him on the arm.

"Ouch." He rubbed the sore spot. "So, sweet sixteen and never been kissed."

"That's a cliché." Jordyn looked out the cab window. "Well, yeah."

"Really?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, I just thought . . ."

"What about you?"

"I've kissed girls." He bit off the edge of a broken fingernail. "Well, just one. Last summer. On the dig. Her name was Yehudit, a professor's daughter. Her hair was long and soft and she always smelled like flowers, even in the dirt." He smiled at the memory. "I almost forgot about that."

"Sounds nice, Emerson."

"So, you like him?"

The cab stopped in front of Will's building.

"Here's your stop," said Jordyn. "Get out and stop bothering me." She grinned.

"See you tomorrow, Quig." He closed the door.

Jordyn directed the driver. "Can you take Lake Shore to Fullerton, please?"

"Lovely tonight," said the driver as he drove along the lake, glassy and dark as the night sky above.





## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

### GONE

Will enjoyed the ease of Saturday mornings. He stayed in bed an hour past his alarm. Jordyn wouldn't be over until eleven.

He prayed under the warmth of his blanket, figuring God would forgive his sloth on such a chilly morning. He snoozed his alarm fifteen minutes more. When the radio went on he forced himself out of bed.

Will had just swallowed the last bite of his biscuit when Jordyn buzzed.

"Hey, Emerson. It's me."

"Come on up. I'll leave the door open. I'm going to get the file. Meet you in the study."

Jordyn shut the apartment door behind her. She met Will at the study door. "Want me to call again?"

"I'll do it this time." Will dialed the number.

The line rang once and popped into the voicemail system. "The subscriber you are trying to reach has exceeded the maximum capacity of this mailbox. Please try your call again later."

Will hung up. "Voicemail's full." He sat and leafed through the file. "I don't see anything else here that would help. What now?"

"Are you sure there wasn't anything else in the envelope?"

"Nothing. Check for yourself."

Jordyn took the envelope and shook it upside down. She opened it wide and felt inside, pushing her fingers to the corners, feeling for anything. On the back of the envelope she felt something rough. She looked inside. There was nothing. She thought for a moment. "Can I have a pencil?" she asked Will.

"Why?"

"Just an idea."

Will found a pencil in the side table drawer. "Here."

Jordyn lightly rubbed the edge of the graphite over the envelope. "Look at that. All those leaf rubbings in third grade were actually useful."

Will craned to see. "What is it?"

"An address."

"Is it Stillman's?"

"I don't know, but it's in Chicago. I say we find out."

Will put on his coat and they went downstairs.

"What's the address?" asked Will.

"It's on Lakewood."

"That's not far. We can walk."

The address took them to a brick courtyard building with three wings.

"Can I see the envelope?" said Will. "No apartment number. Maybe there's a manager."

They found the intercom button marked 'Office' and rang.

A woman answered. "Yeah." Her toddler screamed in the background.

"We're looking for Mr. Stillman. Timothy Stillman," said Jordyn.

"Hold on. I'll meet you out front."

She came to the door, a baby with ruddy cheeks dressed in fuzzy yellow feet pajamas on her hip. "I was wondering if someone else would come," she said.

"What do you mean?" asked Will.

"He left so suddenly. I thought something must be wrong." She looked Jordyn up and down. "He your dad or something?"

"No. Nothing like that," said Jordyn. "We're working on a paper. For school. Mr. Stillman just has some information we need."

"Information? That's what the other guy said."

"Other guy?" asked Will.

"Oh, yeah. He came looking for Mr. Stillman. None too happy, either. I didn't tell him anything. Not like I know where he went, anyway. Here one day, gone the next. He'd only just come back. Now I have to find someone to rent the place. At least I have his deposit."

"What did he look like? The man that stopped by?" asked Jordyn.

"Honestly, I couldn't tell you. Honey, I have three kids and tenants coming and going at all hours. Memory

isn't what it used to be. Wish I could help, but if it isn't important it just doesn't stick, know what I'm saying?" The baby began to fuss. "I gotta get my kid back in."

"Thanks," said Will.

The apartment manager stopped in the doorway. "Oh, and there was this other guy who came by before Mr. Stillman left. Real nice kid. Not much older than you two. Stopped to ask me how it was going. Told me to have a good day. And he actually meant it. Funny about that, how one comment can completely change your mood. Know what I mean?" The apartment manager took her baby inside.

Will frowned. He and Jordyn walked out of the courtyard. Halfway down the block, Will stopped in the middle of the sidewalk.

"What's wrong, Emerson?"

"You heard her. Someone else was looking for Stillman. Someone else is looking for this thing."

"So? Nobody knows you have it."

"Pritchard does."

"You think it's him?"

"He saw the file. Stillman's name is there. Maybe he's doing the same thing we are."

"Even so, what would he do?"

"I don't know. You didn't see him. He's not . . . thinking clearly . . . he's not thinking."

"You can't give up now."

"No. You're wrong. I can." Will stormed off.

"Emerson?"

"I need to be alone." Will turned the corner.

He walked a few blocks and found himself in the church courtyard standing before Ita. He crossed himself and knelt.

"I know you'll help me make the best choice. Just tell me what to do. I don't know what to do."

Jordyn walked up the stone steps. "Emerson?" Will did not turn around. "I'm sorry. If you don't want to go on, that's up to you."

Will crossed himself and stood, still looking at Ita. "This book is supposed to contain all the knowledge of God. It's supposed to be sacred. How come I have it?"

"I don't know. Maybe because you believe it's more than just an old book with no words. Maybe because you think it's something worth protecting." She took his hand. "Come on. Let's go home."



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

### WARM

Nearly a week had passed since Thanksgiving and the crisp days of autumn had given way to winter's chill. Jordyn's doorbell rang precisely at eight. Oisín stood outside in the glow of the porch light. Jordyn brushed cocoa powder off her silky white sweater. She opened the door and smiled. "Gotta love a punctual guest."

"And hello to you, too, Miss Quig." He handed her an old-fashioned rose, white and full-blown. It filled both her hands put together.

"The gentleman brings flowers, too. Thank you." Jordyn touched the flower to her nose. "It smells like . . . June. Our neighbor's garden was full of these when we came to see the house last summer. Where did you find it this time of year?"

He only smiled.

"Come in, it's cold out there."

Jordyn led him upstairs to the kitchen. "Let me put this in some water." She filled a juice glass at the sink, dropped the flower in, and set it on the counter. "There, that works. I'm glad you could come."

"How could I resist?"

“No teasing, now,” said Jordyn.

“Of course not.”

“You’re in luck. The snow’s gone and the wood guy came today so we can go outside. Come with me.” They went up another floor out onto a terrace at the front of the house. It was furnished with a sofa, a pair of chairs, and iron tables with stone tops, all arranged cozily around an oversized fireplace where a small fire crackled.

“Make yourself at home,” said Jordyn.

Oisín took off his overcoat and a soft red scarf. He draped them over one end of the sofa and sat, sinking deep into its cushions. Jordyn curled up on a chair. Between them, the coffee table was set with two heavy mugs, a thermos, a bowl of whipped cream, and bright silver spoons.

“Cocoa?” asked Jordyn.

“I’d love some.”

Jordyn poured two cups. “Whipped cream?”

“Absolutely.”

She spooned a dollop on top of each and handed Oisín his cup. “It’s still a little hot, I think,” she said.

The fire died down to a single weak flame. Jordyn got up and poked at the mostly unburned wood. “My fire-building skills could use a little work. We may have to go inside soon.” She folded her arms around herself and went back to her seat.

Oisín set down his cup. Without a word, he got up and wrapped his scarf around Jordyn’s shoulders. The fire waned. He added a couple of pieces of wood,

shuffled them around with the poker, and sat down to drink his cocoa. “Not bad.”

Jordyn scrunched up her face. “Not bad? What you really mean to say is ‘this is the best hot cocoa I have ever tasted.’”

Oisín put on a serious expression. “This is the best hot cocoa I have ever tasted.”

Jordyn smiled sideways. “Told you so.” She laughed.

“I was at the opening of your father’s new headquarters,” said Oisín.

“Please tell me you aren’t a gamer.”

“No. Not that.”

“Good. Because I would have to kick you out immediately.”

“You’re serious.”

“Dead.” She took another sip. “I heard it was pretty crazy down there.”

“Your father knows how to work a crowd.”

“He’s good at that. He’s still there now, at the office. He spends more time with Serendipity than me.” She paused. “Did that sound bitter?”

“A little,” said Oisín.

“I just miss him, you know? He really does try to make it all work for us. When I was little I used to always be at his desk. He used to spend hours sketching the most beautiful images of Serendipity. I thought they were pictures of me. I guess, in some ways, they were.” She stopped talking for a moment then shook her head.



“You must think I’m pathetic. I have everything. I should be happy.”

“No. It’s okay.” He took a slow sip of cocoa and looked at her warmly. “Really.”

Jordyn took another sip. Oisín cracked a smile.

“What? What’s so funny?” said Jordyn.

“You’ve got a little chocolate mustache.”

She tried to lick it off. “Did I get it?”

He pointed at his own upper lip. “No. There.”

Jordyn tried to reach it again. He laughed.

Jordyn threw up her hands. “Help me!”

Oisín set down his cup. He knelt in front of her and reached for her face. “Hold still,” he said. She looked up at the sky like she did at the doctor’s office or the cosmetics counter. He touched her upper lip, running his fingertips slowly across her mouth. He wiped away the chocolate, his touch familiar and unwavering. Jordyn lowered her gaze and looked into his eyes, unembarrassed.

“Beautiful night,” she said.

“Beautiful.”

On the street below an ambulance wailed. Oisín looked over his shoulder. “I should go.”

“But you just got here.”

“I know. I’m sorry. Thanks for the cocoa.” He gathered his coat.

Jordyn showed him back into the kitchen. “I’m glad you could come. Thanks for the rose.”

He put on his overcoat and she walked him to the porch. He started down the stairs. “Oisín, wait,” Jordyn

called after him. He turned around. "I'm supposed to go to this benefit for our school. It's the Saturday before Christmas. Would you like to come? With me, I mean."

"Oh, uh, I have something I . . . a prior commitment."

"Of course. It's Christmas. You already have plans. No big deal. I can't let Emerson go alone anyway, can I?" she added with a forced smile.

"I'm just a bit busy that night. Can I see you Christmas Day?"

Her smile warmed. "I'd like that."

The sirens grew loud. "I have to go."

"Bye," said Jordyn. He pulled his coat tight, jogged down the stairs, and walked toward the children's hospital at the end of the block.

Jordyn went back upstairs to clean up the terrace. She leaned over to pick up the cups. The red scarf fell forward. Jordyn looked over the edge of the terrace, but could not see Oisin. She ran downstairs and out onto the sidewalk to catch him, but he was already at the end of the block, silhouetted in the lights of the ambulances pulling into the emergency room driveway. She ran her hand down the soft wool and went inside.

Jordyn stopped in the kitchen to give the rose another drink. She picked it up, sniffing its summery fragrance one more time. With her free hand, she pulled the red scarf to her face. It smelled like cloves and cinnamon. The front door rattled. She listened for the sound again. When it didn't come, she decided it was the

wind or her imagination. She turned off the lights and carried her rose upstairs to bed.

Devin waited for Oisín at the end of the block.

“It must be hard to leave her,” she said.

“It is.”

Devin looked at her watch. “It’s almost time.”

“I know.”

“We need to go now.” Devin took Oisín by the elbow and they walked together into the screaming light of the ambulance.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### COMPULSION

Jilly sat on the window sill just before Geography. Logan called from the front of the room, "He hasn't been here for at least a month. What makes you think he'll show up today?"

"I don't know. Maybe a little Christmas miracle or something."

Alex sat beside her. "Yeah, Logan. Where's your Christmas spirit?"

"Term's almost over. I don't think so," said Logan. He looked out the window. "I don't see anyone out there."

"Really?" said Alex. "Take a look at that." She pointed at a man in a dark overcoat.

The street cleaners hadn't been out in weeks and the trash had accumulated since Pritchard last walked the block. He carried an armload of small bags, stooping every few feet to pick up a scrap of paper or crushed pen.

"Santa Claus does exist," said Logan.

Alex squealed. "Mark, you still got the binoculars in your desk?"

"Yeah."

"Hand 'em over. Now!" she yelled. She peered out the window. "Weird."

"Of course he's weird" said Mark, handing over the binoculars.

Alex scowled and adjusted the focus. "No shit, Sherlock. I meant, he's not wearing a tie."

Logan pushed her aside and took the binoculars from her hand. "Let me see." He watched Pritchard fill bag after bag, scribbling so many notes he didn't pocket his pen once.

Jordyn and Will walked through the classroom door. A dozen students angled for a spot at the window. Jordyn whispered in Will's ear. He nodded and they pushed into the crowd. Prichard poked at the bits caught in the storm drain.

Professor Embry walked in and sat at his desk unnoticed. He slammed a drawer. "Chapter twenty, people. Look alive," bellowed Embry. The students jumped then scattered to their desks.

Jordyn passed Will a note. *So?*

Will shrugged. He returned the note. *Can't be good.*

They opened their books and listened to Embry summarize the semester. The professor wrapped up his lecture fifteen minutes early. "How's that for an end of term treat?" he complimented himself. "I suggest you use the time to proofread your papers. Remember, they count for half of your grade and grammar counts. The last day of class is Friday. That would be the day after tomorrow. I expect them to be handed in at the beginning of the

period." The students cleared their desks and filed out of the door, faces glum.

Jordyn and Will packed their things and left the classroom.

"What do you think it means?" asked Jordyn.

"I'm not sure."

"Maybe he's over it. He's back into his normal routine."

"That was not normal, even for him. I need to talk to Professor Barrett. His office is downstairs. Come on." Will took off down the corridor.

"Barrett?" asked Jordyn, trying to keep up.

"He's my Deacon."

"At church?"

"Yeah."

"I had no idea. Again with the surprises."

"You should come with me. To Mass." They jogged down the stairs.

"Me? No. Not my thing. Really."

"You're Catholic?"

"I guess. Maybe by default or something."

"How about Christmas? They sing carols. It's nice. Very festive."

"I sort of made plans. With Oisin."

"Just so you know, this is where I am supposed to give you a hard time."

"I know."

"But I won't." Will grinned. "What time?"

"What?"

"What time are you meeting your boyfriend?"

“Emerson! You said . . . He’s not . . .”

“Sorry.” He sneezed out, “Sort of.”

“Emerson!”

“Okay, okay. What time?”

“Oh.” She stopped walking. “That’s a problem. I don’t know. He had to leave. We never said.”

Will let her catch up. “Molly’s is serving breakfast,” he said.

“On Christmas?”

“We can stop by on the way to Mass.”

Boxes of textbooks spilled out of the loading dock into the corridor on either side of Barrett’s door.

“Some office,” said Jordyn.

The door was closed. Will tapped on the glass.

“Professor?” He knocked harder and the door unlatched.

“Professor?” He pushed it open and stepped inside. “He’s not here.”

Jordyn stood in the doorway. The desk was empty except for Iain Pritchard’s book, centered perfectly, sticky notes in every color marking at least fifty pages. Jordyn pushed past Will and opened the book.

“We should get out of here,” said Will.

“Don’t you want to see what he’s got planned for the last few days?”

“Not really.”

“Well, we can’t all be culture geniuses like you. I’m looking.” She leafed through. “Covered that.” She turned a few pages. “Done.” The book fell open to a chapter called, “The Birth of the Museum Collection.” A newspaper clipping, folded up in a flat scroll, was taped to

the upper margin. Jordyn uncurled the newsprint. “Look at this. It’s about that museum”

Will read over her shoulder.

### **Summer Fun in Small Town America**

“One person’s trash is another’s treasure,” Dorothea Whitford, the proprietor of a very curious museum, tells her patrons. Housed in a 1920s era theater, Dorothea’s Curiosity Shop and Museum of Unusual Objects holds treasures, to be sure, but what brings in most of the visitors are the Wunderkammer, or Cabinets of Wonder. Popular among the aristocracy and elite of Renaissance Europe, such collections were the precursors to modern museums. The small studios adjacent to the theater have been turned into these jewel boxes of natural history, art, and archaeology.

The museum’s collection is large. Most of it is stored in crates in what was once the theater house. “The place is packed to the rafters. Sometimes I’m not even sure what all is in there,” Whitford confided. “Promise me you won’t tell National Risk.”

Shhh. Don’t worry, we won’t. Displays rotate throughout the year, so be sure to call ahead.

In one of the photos above the article, a round woman with black hair stood in a Wunderkammer, every



inch of every wall covered by deer antlers and shark teeth, strings of amber and a still-life made entirely of beetles. The other photo was a close-up of one of the museum display cases.

“Look at these frogs,” said Jordyn.

“The article in the file mentioned them.” Will ran his finger along the edge of the grainy black and white photo. “That’s strange. Here.” He pointed to the corner of the frame. Next to the dancing frogs lay a small book with a stone in its clasp. Will looked at the top of the clipping. “This is from May, just before the storm. The book was there.”

Iain Pritchard hung up his overcoat just inside the door of his apartment and took his newfound collection to the library. He taped and filed them in proper order then stood in the corner of the room to admire his work.

The tape holding up a bag marked *Soda (unfinished)*, 7 November, 08:37, Eastview gave way. It dropped to the floor taking three others with it. Pritchard backed up, pressing himself against the wall. He took a quick breath then dove into the sea of brown paper bags on the floor, searching frantically for the fallen among the cast-off bits. He crawled across the floor pulling up bag after bag, laughing and crying until his body ached. At quarter-past one he went to the kitchen for something to eat. He brought back a bottle of screw-top red instead. He drank half and passed out. The bottle tipped over, spilling the rest of the wine over his precious finds.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

# BLACK AND WHITE

Will's zipped the bag over his tuxedo. He pulled the small book out of his backpack and stuffed it into the inside pocket of his overcoat. He headed out the door. The term had ended and after the Black and White his obligation to Eastview would be over, at least for a couple of weeks. At the bottom of the stairs, the mail carrier jammed envelopes into the narrow boxes and sighed.

"Busy this time of year," said Will.

"Busiest time of all. Do me a favor and take yours?"

"Sure. Merry Christmas."

"You, too, Will." She handed him a bundle of a dozen cards and letters. He jammed them into the back pocket of his jeans where they would go unnoticed by any holiday pickpockets on the el.

Will rang the bell at Jordyn's front door. She answered in one of her father's button down shirts and pink sweatpants, her hair already twisted up in the back and piled high on her head. A few tendrils fell in graceful spirals around her face, just skimming her shoulders.

Jordyn took Will's tuxedo. "I'll hang this in the guest bedroom upstairs. My dad's coming from the

office. We'll meet him there. I have to finish up. Snacks are in the kitchen. Make yourself at home." She ran upstairs leaving Will to fend for himself.

Will went to the kitchen and helped himself to a bottle of imported water, the one in the blue glass. He tossed his coat over the top of a barstool and sorted through his mail, discarding the advertisements and opening the envelopes that looked like Christmas cards. Two came from their building tenants, one from the dentist, and the other had no return address. Will pulled the cards from their envelopes, "Season's Greetings" from the dentist, the Star of Bethlehem from upstairs, and a reindeer on a coffee break from downstairs. The card with no sender was white with simple red letters, J-O-Y; no sentiment inside, just a note, *Peace be with you – TS*. Will checked the postmark. Provident, Illinois.

Jordyn's high heels clicked lightly on the wood floor. She walked into the kitchen. The silken folds of her white gown hugged her waist and hips, falling into a train flowing five feet behind her. Her shoulders and breastbone were bare. Opalescent flecks sparkled on her toes and fingers and the faintest shimmer of pink iced her lips.

Will stood, slack jawed. "Wow, you are a girl," he said.

"Emerson!"

"Honestly, you look amazing."

Jordyn curtsied. "Why thank you, sir." She pointed up the stairs. "Your turn."

Fifteen minutes later, Will came down the stairs, jacket in hand, bowtie draped around his neck. "It's been a while since I tied one of these."

"My dad can't ever get it, either." Jordyn, already in her coat, fixed his tie. She patted him on the lapel. "Not so bad yourself. Cab's waiting." She handed him his overcoat. "Let's get out of here."

The driver cruised south on Lake Shore Drive. Lake Michigan sparkled, reflecting the light of the city under a cold, clear sky. The cab pulled up to The Field Museum behind half a dozen more.

Jordyn paid the driver. "We'll get out here. Thank you." She gathered up her gown and she and Will walked, fast as they could, to the entrance.

They waited at the coat check, cheeks wind-kissed and rosy. Jordyn took off her coat and draped it over her arm. "Give me your coat. I'll check them. You can go find our table." Will took off his coat and handed it to her. He started to walk away. Jordyn felt something blocky on her arm. She reached inside Will's coat pulled out the book. "Emerson!"

Will turned around to see her walking toward him, book in hand.

She slapped it into his hand. "Seriously. You have to stop carrying this thing everywhere."

Will shrugged and tucked the book into his jacket pocket.

Jordyn went back to check their coats. When she reached the Great Hall, it was already crowded.

"Jordyn," called a strawberry haired man.

"Dad!" She ran and jumped into his arms like she did when she was three years old.

He kissed her on the cheek and set her down. "Look at you!

Jordyn grinned. "I was afraid I might not see you, tonight."

"How could I miss you? You're the most beautiful girl, excuse me, *young woman*, in the place."

"Dad," she whined. She adjusted his tie. "That's better."

"Thanks, Pumpkin."

She took his hand. "Come on. I want you to meet Will. He's already in there somewhere."

"Have you been in yet?"

"Not yet."

"Then allow me to walk you in." M.L. Quig led his daughter into the museum hall.

Faceted glass balls and twinkle lights hung from balcony to balcony, glittering above their heads. Near the center of the room, a big band played "Moonlight Serenade." Silver-haired ladies in couture whirled around the dance floor with their tuxedoed gentlemen while most of the students slouched around the edge of the room talking with friends or twiddling the silverware, grudgingly waiting for the after dinner band.

M.L. Quig introduced his daughter to two Aldermen, the Chief of Police, and the CEO of a multi-national. Before long a crowd formed around him.

"Jordyn, do you mind if I meet you later?" asked her father.

"No problem, Dad."

"Save a dance for me?"

"Sure," she said, but he had already been swept away, the group around him increasing until he was no longer visible. Jordyn watched for a few minutes, but he was gone, enveloped in his world, not hers.

She surveyed the hall. Her eyes came to rest across the room on the back of Will's head and she smiled. Someone tapped her shoulder from behind.

"Jordyn?" said Logan.

She turned around. "You're alone? Where are all your friends?"

"They're around. Nice dress."

"Thanks."

Logan shifted his weight. "I'm . . . I'm sorry."

"About what?"

"That whole thing . . . in Geography."

"Me, too."

Alex, Jilly, and Cooper scurried up behind him.

"Hi, Jordyn," said Cooper.

Jordyn smiled at her. Alex shoved Cooper aside. "Saw your boyfriend."

"What?" Jordyn looked around the room.

"Emerson's a real hit with the gray-hairs. Such a loser."

Jordyn scowled.

Alex latched onto Logan's arm. "Where's your little Irish friend?" she sniped.

"What do you care?" said Jordyn. "She's not coming. Happy?"

Alex snorted.

"One less person you have to annoy. You'll have more time to party," said Jordyn.

"Party? You have no idea. Come on, Logan. She's not worth your time." Alex turned and strutted away. Jilly and Cooper fell in behind.

Logan shrugged. "See you," he said and followed Alex into the heart of the hall.

Jordyn made her way across the room, saying hello to the strangers who stopped her every few yards. By the time she reached the place she had seen Will, he had vanished. She wandered past a few tables, but did not see him in the crowd. She climbed onto a chair for a better view.

Will stood in the middle of the room with two professors, talking and laughing, not as student and teacher, but collegially. Will spoke and the men were rapt.

A husky woman bumped into Jordyn, making her reach down to steady herself on the back of the chair. By the time she stood again, Professor Barrett had joined Will and the others. Will shook his hand. He and Barrett excused themselves and found an empty highboy near the entrance. They spoke for a moment. Will laid the book on the table. Barrett touched the stone. He held it close to his face, examining the clasp with care. He laid the book back on the table, patting it gently. Will slipped it back into his pocket.

Jordyn eased down from her chair and jogged across the room. She found Will and Professor Barrett, still talking.

"There you are," said Will.

"Good evening, Miss Quig," said Barrett.

"Professor." Jordyn smiled politely.

"Will was just telling me about your recent adventures," said Barrett.

Jordyn shot Will an uneasy look. "Was he?"

Security scrambled toward the museum entrance. A man in a black overcoat forced his way past them and into the hall.

"Will!" the man shouted. "William Emerson!"

"I think it's Pritchard," said Will. Jordyn stood high on her toes, but couldn't see over the people standing around them.

Pritchard burst through the crowd and, for a moment, stood eye-to-eye with Will. Security pulled Pritchard back and zip tied his wrists hard and tight. They dragged him away screaming, "Will, it's real! I know it! The book is real! You must protect it. Your father will know what to do. Will! Protect it!"

Will stood at the highboy, speechless. Jordyn tugged on his sleeve. "You okay, Emerson?"

Will nodded. "So, maybe he is a little weird." He put his hand in his pocket. The book was gone and so was Barrett.





## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

### CROSSROADS

"The coat check!" Jordyn shouted. "He's leaving!"

They sprinted after him. Barrett ran down the museum stairs to the taxi stand and jumped into a white car with 'AAA' on the side. It squealed away before the door closed.

Will opened the nearest cab door he could find. He and Jordyn scrambled in. Will shouted at the driver.

"North on Lake Shore Drive. Hurry!"

"Where is he going?" asked Jordyn.

"To a crossroads."

Jordyn pointed ahead. "There's his cab."

The white cab exited at Foster Avenue. "Isn't this your neighborhood?" said Jordyn.

Will nodded and leaned forward in his seat. "Get off here, then go north on Broadway," he directed the driver.

He took off his jacket and wrapped it around Jordyn's bare shoulders. "We'll be there soon." He pushed some cash through the slot in the window separating them from the driver. "Pull into the church parking lot on the left, just past Catalpa."

The church grounds were quiet. Will took Jordyn by the hand and led her through the courtyard, past Ita's statue, up the steps. They entered the dark vestibule. Will tightened his jacket around Jordyn. He whispered, "Go to the rectory. It's right around the corner. Get the priest."

"But, Will," she protested.

"Just go. Now." He turned her body toward the door. She gave him an apprehensive look over her shoulder then disappeared through the doors.

Jordyn stepped outside into the cold night. The stars, usually faded in the city light, shined with startling clarity, bright and abundant. She clutched Will's jacket and took off down the stairs. The straps of her shoes cut into her feet and she began to regret her choice of footwear.

It took only seconds for her to reach the front of the rectory. She rang the bell and pounded the door as hard as she could.

"Hello!" she shouted. "Please, we need help! We need your help." No one came to the door; no one turned on a light. She ran to the back door and repeated her plea. There was no answer.

Will stood in the vestibule, listening to the faint shuffling of a single pair of shoes on stone. He cracked the door and slipped quietly into the nave, now decorated in the solemn pink and violet of Advent. Only the sanctuary was lit.

Barrett covered the altar with a cloth and laid the small, dusty book in the center. He lit the candles.

Will inched forward. "Professor Barrett?"

"Stay where you are!"

"You don't have to do this."

"The book was meant for me, not you." Barrett slipped a violet stole over his head.

Will stepped forward.

"Stop!" shouted Barrett. He paced behind the altar. "More often than I can count, Stillman sat in that office complaining about his job and confessing his sins. He couldn't stay away from the boats and the horses. He needed the money. It was easy to convince him to recommend an appraisal to that old bat . . . for a price, of course." Barrett chuckled. "And I gladly handed over every penny I had. Dorothea Whitford, she couldn't have been more overjoyed to see him."

Will inched up.

Barrett held up his hand. "I told you not to move!" He closed his eyes and put his hands together in prayer. He took a deep breath then exhaled slowly. "I didn't count on the storm, but, really, it was perfect." He smiled for a moment.

Will stepped forward.

"I said, don't move." Barrett opened his eyes and frowned. "Perfect . . . until Stillman decided to stay on to pick up the pieces. No matter, I was already waiting anyway. What's a little more time? It was nothing."

Barrett came from behind the altar and walked down a step. "Stillman got the book, though; brought it home. Then he stopped taking my calls and he returned my money. He returned the money!" Barrett backed up the

step toward the altar, keeping an eye on Will. “And he sent the book to your father instead.”

“The pages are blank,” said Will.

“Of course they are,” said Barrett. He laughed then returned to the altar. He ran his hand over the book, pausing at the stone. “I saw the story in the paper months ago. There it was in the photo, the book with the sapphire clasp, next to frogs in dresses in a junk shop only two hours away. Tell me, what kind of place is that for something so sacred?”

Barrett leaned forward, both hands on the altar, head down. “They shouldn’t have pulled me out.”

“But they saved you,” said Will.

“Saved me?” Barrett shook his head. “They condemned me! I should have died in that pond.”

Will walked to the bottom of the steps. He looked up at Barrett. “You risked your life to save hers.”

“I failed,” whispered Barrett. “I have failed her every day since. There’s not a moment that goes by that I don’t hear her screams. Don’t you see? I’m not meant to be here.” Suddenly he raised the small book above his head and shouted, “Faith is the key!”

The sapphire burned, radiating blinding light in every color. Tendrils sparked off the stone, surrounding Barrett, arms wrapping him in a luminous embrace. The intensity forced Will to shield his eyes.

Barrett’s eyes were wide and unblinking. He did not shrink in pain. Unable to bear the brightness, Will turned away. The thunder of a thousand voices speaking a thousand languages shattered the century old stained

glass. Will ducked between the pews and covered his head as the shards rained down around him. Then, in an instant, the light and the sound ceased.

Will crawled out. There was no glass on the floor. He was alone in the church under Ita's pristine window. Will stumbled into the aisle and up the stairs. He knelt before the altar, eyes closed.

"Take me! Please, take me! Please . . ." shouted Will.

Someone touched his shoulder. "Will." The voice was clear, Deirdre's delicate brogue, sweet and uncomplicated.

"Take me with you," he pleaded.

She sat on the steps beside him.

"I don't belong here any more than Barrett," said Will.

"You asked me for help. I came. Do you think God would abandon you? Your faith is strong, Will."

"I'm not strong," he whispered. "I opened the book. It didn't work. I stood at that grave and I wished for death." Tears streamed down his face. "Why did you send it to me if I wasn't supposed to use it?"

"It was meant for you, Will, and everyone it touched. They prayed, too. Stillman and Barrett. Even Pritchard."

Will's brow furrowed. "It was you," he said. "The museum. Dorothea." He paused. "And the messenger. Oisín. God's messenger . . ."

"Open your eyes, Will."

He looked at her. She wore a simple beige dress, her hair covered by a gray hooded cape, a soft halo surrounding her body. "Ita . . ." Will said her name, letting it echo through the church.

She stood. "I must leave now. And you must choose."

"I need . . . I need to see my mother . . ."

"Your mother is not with us, Will."

Ita's halo intensified. Will forced his eyes to stay open. "Where is she?" he shouted. "Please, where is she?" Ita's light enveloped him then exploded, passing through his flesh as if he did not exist.

Jordyn ran back to the front of the church, climbed the stairs, and went inside. She searched the dark vestibule expecting to find Will where she had left him moments before. She cracked the sanctuary door and looked down the aisle. Will lay at the top of the stairs in front of the altar, lifeless, on his back like before, below the library window. She tore off her shoes and ran toward him. His jacket flew off her shoulders and dropped softly to the cold tile.

She knelt and leaned over him. "Emerson!" She shook his shoulders. He did not move. She put her forehead on his. Her hair fell onto his face. "Emerson," she whispered. Jordyn laid her head on his chest. She heard no heartbeat, felt no breath. "Will, come back. Come back to me," she pleaded. She closed her eyes and lay with him on the hard stone.

Will opened his eyes and whispered, "She's here."



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

# CHRISTMAS DAY

Will rolled out of bed before dawn. He pulled open the curtains at his window. Fresh snow covered the street, thick and clean, still untouched by the plows. He showered and dressed, then headed for the kitchen where he sat sipping dark tea and stuffing his mouth with biscuits while he waited for Jordyn. Down the hall, his father cleared his throat.

Will crumpled the empty biscuit wrapper, the crunch of the foil extraordinarily loud in the quiet of the apartment. He tossed it in the trash and stood as still as he could, listening. His father cleared his throat again. Will walked to his father's door and knocked softly. "Dad?" There was no response. He knocked harder. "Dad? Please. Open the door." There was no sound from the other side. Will leaned, back against the jamb, and whispered, "Dad, I need you." The knob turned. William Emerson, Sr. invited his son inside.

Jordyn switched off her clock radio in the middle of *The Christmas Song*, having heard every version ever made about a hundred times by now. She checked herself

in her bedroom mirror. She picked a speck of lint off her trousers and pushed a pearl button at the cuff of her blouse into its hole. She ran her fingers through her hair fussing with the loose curls until they fell, tousled over her shoulders, as if by accident. She fumbled through her makeup bag, pulled out her contact lens case, and flipped open the side marked *R*. The brown iris stared up at her. She closed the case, flipping it over a few times in her fingertips before she tossed it onto the nightstand next to Oisín's rose. A petal dropped to the floor.

Will hadn't spoken to Jordyn since the night of the Black and White. He waited for her in the entryway of his building, pressing his nose to the glass in the door. He made smiley faces in the condensation. Ten minutes passed.

Jordyn jogged up the steps to Will's door, red scarf wrapped to her nose, her cheeks flushed, pink and full of life. Will opened the door.

Jordyn pulled the scarf down. "Sorry. I'm late. El. Snow."

"Nice scarf. Nice eyes. Is that lip-gloss?"

She smiled at him. "Come on, let's go."

The neighborhood still slept under the gray dawn light. Will and Jordyn kicked the snow into delicate puffs as they walked. Neither spoke.

They rounded the corner at Clark Street. Jordyn raced up the block. She turned to face Will, backed up a few steps, and grinned. Will stopped in his tracks, tucked his hands into his pockets, and shrugged. "What?"



Jordyn ran a few steps ahead and crouched down. She scooped together a fist full of snow and compacted it into a near perfect sphere.

"I see," taunted Will. "Give it your best shot. Show me what you've got, California."

Jordyn pressed the snow into a hard ball. Will tucked his shoulders, cowering, trying not to laugh. He held his arms out in self-defense. She gave him a sideways smile and let the snowball fly. It landed hard on his shoulder with a distinct *fop*. Snow spattered his chin with an icy and unexpected sting. Jordyn giggled.

"Funny, Quig. Very funny." Will waded into the biggest snowdrift he could find. He shoveled up a loose handful of snow, packed it fast, and flung it in Jordyn's direction. The ball disintegrated in the air.

"Nice try, Emerson!"

"Dry snow. Makes lousy snowballs." He scooped up another handful, packing it into a lumpy, but more stable ball. He took aim. By the time the snow grazed Jordyn's shins, Will was already prepping his next snowball. Jordyn brushed the snow away, covertly forming another ball. She popped up and whipped it, sidearm, at Will. It spattered across his knees. He did not move. The snowball dropped from his hand, sinking into the drift at his ankles.

Jordyn's brow crinkled. "Emerson?"

"Oh, Jordyn . . ." Will paused. "I'm . . . I'm so sorry," he said, gazing at the storefront behind her.

Jordyn turned sharply, coming face-to-face with her own distorted reflection in a dirty, cracked window. The

sign above her head creaked as it swung in the morning breeze, the gold and black lettering faded and peeling.

She cupped her hands to look through the window. The room was dark. Her lips tightened into an angry bow. She flicked a chip of gold paint off the window frame then rested her head on the cold glass. She traced a small three-lobed knot at the center of a circle onto the grimy window then wiped the glass clean. She stepped back and closed her eyes then inhaled the winter air deeply and emptied herself of all expression.

She opened her eyes. Will stood beside her, his reflection distorted in the cracked window. He opened his mouth to speak. Jordyn put her fingertips to his reflected lips before he could form the words.

“Molly’s is gone. He’s gone,” she whispered. Jordyn slammed her palms hard against the cracked glass. “No!” she shouted. Gold flakes fell from the windowpane and fluttered, shimmering to the snow-covered sidewalk below.

Will grabbed Jordyn’s wrists and pulled her to his chest, holding her tight. She buried her face in his coat, her body heaving with each sob. She leaned on him, heavy with sorrow and disappointment. He held her until she stopped. She stepped back, composed herself, and took his elbow. They walked to St. Ita in silence.

When they turned the corner at the front of the church courtyard, Will stopped in mid-stride. “What?” said Jordyn.

At the far end, leaning with his back against the fence, Oisín watched the cars pull into the church parking lot. Jordyn searched Will's face.

"I'll see you inside," he said. "Go."

Jordyn let go of his elbow. Will walked up the stairs and disappeared into the church.

Jordyn watched Oisín for a minute. He turned to her and smiled warmly. She walked to him, hands in her coat pockets. Her brow crinkled. "I thought . . . I thought you were gone."

"I know. I'm sorry. It was time for us to leave."

Oisín raised his bare hands to her wind chilled cheeks. She closed her eyes, giving in to his touch.

"Trust me?" he asked.

Jordyn opened her eyes.

"There's something you need to see," he said.

"Trust me." Jordyn nodded.

Oisín held out his hand. She took it without hesitation. The sky turned to night. They stood at the top of the stairs in front of a stone rowhome.

"This is my house. How?" asked Jordyn, eyes wide. She tried to open the door. An ambulance wailed in the distance.

"That is your past. You can't go in." Oisín stepped down onto the sidewalk. Again, he offered her his hand.

"Please, Jordyn. Come with me."

"Do I have a choice?"

"We all have free will." She took his hand and they walked down the street. A short woman with long wheat-colored hair waited at the end of the block.

"Devin?" said Jordyn.

Devin smiled tenderly. "He hasn't explained, has he?"

Oisín frowned. "Some things require showing, don't you think?"

Jordyn stopped in her tracks. She tucked the red scarf tight around her neck. "Someone, please tell me what's going on."

Oisín looked her in the eye. "Trust me."

"You keep saying that," said Jordyn. She looked at Devin.

Devin shrugged. "It's time to go."

They walked to the end of the block and into the lobby of the children's hospital. The woman at the reception desk did not look up as they passed by. They followed a bright red railroad track inlaid into the floor tile past the gift shop and the elevators. They walked by an empty waiting area, quiet except for cheerful tinging and clanging of a kinetic sculpture. Devin led them down the hallway to the ER waiting room, painted soft green with blocky trees and ladybugs perched on curvy blades of grass.

A young mother with a car seat hanging from the crook of her arm struggled with an exam room door. Oisín placed his hand near hers and pushed. Clear of the door, the mother tucked a pink blanket around her sleeping baby's chin. The lines on her forehead softened. She smiled at no one in particular.

A gray-haired couple sat together near the nurse's station. The woman folded and re-folded red and brown

feet pajamas. The man looked at his watch. Devin took the seat across from them. The man reached for his wife's hand and she exhaled.

An ambulance pulled into the driveway, lights flashing. Devin looked at Oisín. "It's time," she said and the three of them stood at the edge of a room busy with nurses wearing teddy bear scrubs and a doctor barking out instructions. A small boy lay on the exam table under a harsh halogen lamp. The boy's father stood near the door holding a bottle with a pink label and no cap.

Devin held Jordyn's hand. The doctor and nurses stopped cold.

Oisín walked to the bedside. He stroked the boy's face and lifted him into his arms, rocking him gently as he sang an Irish cradle song, soft and sweet.

He laid the boy back on the table, brushed the hair back from his tiny forehead, and stepped away. A nurse turned the boy on his side. He gagged and the smell of bubblegum filled the room.

The halogen lamp went dark. The doctors and nurses, the boy and his family, and Devin were gone and Oisín stood in front of Jordyn.

"Don't be afraid," he said.

Jordyn ran her fingertips along the side of his face. "I'm not." She wrapped her arms around him.

Oisín stroked her soft hair. He held her tight and whispered, "I have loved you forever." And she knew it was true.

She stood with him, her soul laid bare in his presence as it had been for countless lifetimes.

*Forever . . .*

The word washed over her in crushing waves, unyielding, eternal. Her knees began to buckle. Oisín raised her up and kissed her lips. Jordyn kissed him back hard. He tasted like cardamom and honey and the dust of ancient stone cobbled streets. She didn't feel the snow now falling in heavy flakes all around them on the sidewalk in front of the church.

Oisín kissed her forehead and watched as she opened her eyes, watched as she recognized the centuries of longing and of sorrow no longer hidden in his boyish face.

"You have to go," said Jordyn.

"I do."

Oisín twisted the ring off his finger. He held Jordyn's hand and pressed his ring into her palm. He closed her fingers tight around it and placed her fist over her heart. He kissed her again, long and slow, then walked away, vanishing into the falling snow.

Jordyn uncurled her fingers and looked at the ring, the three-lobed knot inside a circle. She smiled and pushed it into her coat pocket, deep as she could.

Will waited behind the last pew. The altar servers lit the candles and walked to the back of the church with the priest. At the front, a guitarist strummed the first notes of "What Child Is This."

Jordyn slipped inside with the rest of the late-comers, excusing her way politely to Will's side. She

took Will's elbow. "So much for a good seat," she whispered in his ear.

He smiled. "Merry Christmas, Quig."

"Merry Christmas, Emerson."

After Mass, Will walked Jordyn to the el stop then headed home. His stomach growled. He took the back stairs, the quickest and most direct route to the kitchen, two at a time.

Will tossed his keys onto the table. They landed on a manila folder with a soft thud and slid off the table taking the file with them. The contents of the file scattered when it hit the floor. He collected the keys and, pausing to read a line here and there, stuffed the loose papers back in place until the file was once again whole.

He rummaged through a cabinet until he found a fresh package of biscuits, pocketing a few. The stack of files on the counter stood at least ten high. He thumbed the edge of the folder, tucked it into his backpack, and left the way he had come.

An hour later Will rang Jordyn's bell. She opened the door. He slipped the corner of the file out of his bag. She smiled sideways and pulled him inside.







For more information visit:  
<http://www.emersonandquig.com>

**What's next?**

Emerson and Quig: Book Two  
Finding Jordyn

*Now that Will and Jordyn have touched heaven,  
find out what happens when hell comes calling.*