

Chapter One

Life seems nothing more than a quick succession of busy nothings.

~Jane Austen

For twenty glorious minutes at dawn, the village was all hers. Doves cooed and mist hovered on sheep-dotted fields as she picked up her pace and quickened her breath. When she finally huffed past the dark, empty shops and cobblestone streets, the sun winked through a cluster of trees to signal it was time to head home. Some people hated jogging—the sting of air in the lungs, the irritating burn inside the thighs. But Holly Newbury found it nothing short of blissful.

The running ritual had started six years ago, when she'd quit university to help raise her three younger sisters. She'd craved something she could call hers and quickly found it in a morning jog around the village. Those twenty minutes gave Holly something precious—twelve hundred seconds to clear her thoughts, center herself, prepare for the day ahead. She always felt a hesitant pull toward Foxglove House during that final spurt up the hill because she knew the moment she entered, chaos would ensue. Always the best kind of chaos—people she loved, getting ready for their day as she helped them make breakfast, prepare lunches, find homework from the night before—but her time became theirs again.

A few minutes after this morning's run, Holly stood over the Aga, nudging scrambled eggs inside a pan. As she switched off the burner, she heard footsteps clomp down the stairs.

"No. It's the effing wild berry! I can't find it *anywhere!*" Bridget shouted, accusing her twin sister as they entered the kitchen, tossing their phones into the wicker basket on the counter. Holly had created the "basket rule" when their father bought the twins mobile phones last year, for their sixteenth birthdays. Holly didn't want them heads down and tapping during breakfast.

"How come it's always *my* fault when you lose something? I don't even use that gunk," Rosalee answered, rolling her eyes and taking a seat at the kitchen table. "It's nasty. Smells like rotten fruit."

"Then you *did* use it!" Bridget pointed.

"No, I only smelled it. But that was, like, two weeks ago." Rosalee poured a glass of orange juice. "It's not my fault you can't keep track of anything like a normal human being."

"Well, it's not *my* fault you're an effing idiot!"

"Enough, girls!" Holly gave her best stern look. She turned to Bridget, waiting for eye contact. "And no cussing in this house. You know better."

"But 'effing' isn't a cuss word," Bridget argued.

"Maybe not, but it's implied profanity."

"Exactly. Implied. *Not* actual," Bridget said to her eggs.

"Well, in this house, 'implied' is close enough." Holly nodded toward the plate. "Now eat something, both of you. You'll be late for school."

She left the twins to their breakfasts, hoping they wouldn't kill each other in her absence, and walked down the long hall. She wondered how much longer this hateful phase of theirs would linger—the twins had never gotten along well, but over the past few months, they barely had a kind word for each other.

Fraternal twins born three minutes apart, Bridget and Rosalee had broken every cliché of twinship since the beginning. As a newborn, Bridget screeched and wailed, while Rosalee dozed through everything. When they were little girls, Bridget was fearless and temperamental, while Rosalee sat quietly in corners and read books. As teenagers, the differences had only grown more distinct—tastes in music, clothing, friendships. Polar opposites. The girls had even worked hard to look less alike. Three months ago, Bridget had bleached her long hair blond, while Rosalee had trimmed hers to shoulder length, keeping it natural brown.

Reaching the sitting room, Holly spotted Bridget's neon-pink backpack crumpled beneath the couch where the twins had finished their homework last night. Holly shook her head at the sight: wrinkled term papers and battered notebooks sticking out of pockets, an open book with a broken spine splayed out on the floor, and beside it—a-ha!—the missing tube of lip gloss. Holly snatched up the book, the bag, and the gloss, and went to check on Abbey. It wasn't like her to be the last one down.

"Abbey! Time for breakfast!" Holly called from the staircase.

"Coming! I'm *coming!*" Abbey emerged at the top, fidgeting with the collar on her sweater—part of the girls' school uniform—and nearly tripped on the first step down.

Petite for her age, twelve-year-old Abbey still seemed like an awkward little girl. But Holly was grateful for the awkwardness. Too many of Abbey's schoolmates were eager to grow up fast, experimenting with makeup and showing off their midriffs, already begging parents for piercings or tattoos. But not Abbey. She'd rather play outside, watching a ladybug crawl on a frond, than worry about boys or makeup. She also wore glasses that fit her personality, made her look as bookish as she was. An old soul.

When Abbey reached the bottom of the stairs, Holly adjusted her sister's collar and

followed her to the kitchen.

“I smell bacon. Mmmm,” Abbey said as they went. “Is it the maple kind?”

“Yes. Just for you,” Holly whispered then rounded the corner and set the backpack beside Bridget’s chair. “I found your lip gloss. Second pocket,” she added, then poured another cup of coffee.

Rosalee, newly absolved, tossed a self-satisfied glance in Bridget's direction.

"Five minutes," Holly announced as she saw the time and watched them gulp down their food.

Holly remembered well the first breakfast they’d had when she returned to Foxglove House six years ago. A somber morning, where the only sound had been the quiet clanking of flatware against plates. She knew nobody wanted to be there, sitting at that table. Her sisters would much rather have been up in their bedrooms, grieving privately. Staring out windows and gulping back tears. Wishing their mother had been at the head of the table, where she belonged.

But Holly had insisted on that half hour, knowing back then the importance of it. Coming together as a family, if only in silence. And since that first morning, those breakfasts had become a steady routine, something the girls could count on. Something Holly could count on, too.

Over the years, though, they’d turned into little more than bickering sessions, an inconvenience the girls rushed through. But maybe this particular morning’s squabbling could be blamed on the fact that school was back in session after a long break. Perhaps the girls needed time to readjust to the early morning routine.

"Outta here," Bridget announced first, disappearing in a neon-pink streak.

"Don't forget your umbrella. It's going to rain!" Holly called after her.

"I'm gone too," Rosalee said, sipping the last of her juice and pushing back from the table.

"Wait for your sister," Holly said, receiving an impatient sigh in return.

"I'm eating as fast as I can!" Abbey insisted through a mouthful of eggs.

"That's gross," Rosalee said then asked Holly, "Can I go to the bakery after school?"

"As long as you take Abbey. Do you have money?"

Rosalee nodded. "Couple of fivers."

One last bite and Abbey scrambled to catch up to Rosalee, who was already halfway down the hall. They slammed the front door, taking all the energy of youth along with them.

Thankful that she could trust their tiny Cotswold village, Chilton Crosse, to provide the girls a safe walk to school, Holly sat at the corner desk to check her laptop for her next assignment, another staple in her morning routine. As much as she would love to open the French doors wide, linger against the doorframe and sip her coffee for hours while she watched the garden change in the light of a mid-April morning, there wasn't that sort of time today.

She drummed her fingers, waiting for the slow-moving university site to open, and let her eyes wander over to *it*. Something she'd received in yesterday's post. Something she'd intended to throw away. Sondra's wedding invitation, propped against the edge of the counter, asking Holly to look at her own life and compare it with someone else's. This had been the third invitation in six months—two for weddings, and one for a baby shower. While Holly had created an odd sort of life here in her childhood home, raising her sisters, her university friends had moved on, meeting new guys, getting engaged, having children of their own.

Standing, Holly took the few steps to the counter, snatched the thick, expensive card, and

chucked it into the receptacle. *Good for Sondra*, she thought, shoving down her jealousy.

Envy is a poison, her mother had once told her. Indeed.

Returning to her laptop, she heard the grandfather clock's chime echoing down the hall and realized she only had an hour before visiting Gertrude's. Barely enough time to start brainstorming that research paper. Or to emotionally prepare for the visit to come.

* * * *

Clutching the oatmeal raisin bread she'd made the night before, Holly stood at the door of the cottage and wondered *why* she put herself through this torture. She already knew every one of the probing questions she would get, as well as the rote answers she would be forced to offer. These interrogations always turned her inside out.

Gertrude Middleton, her father's cousin, lived in Hickory Cottage down the road. Though only in her early seventies, Gertrude seemed at least a decade older: the grey hair she refused to color, the cane she leaned upon because of arthritis, the general crankiness with which she approached each new day. Holly often questioned why her father displayed such loyalty to "just" a cousin—especially a grouchy, ungrateful one—by stopping in to see her every week, when he didn't have time.

"It's the right thing to do," he'd once told her. "She's family."

So, Holly had taken over her mother's duties six years ago, visiting Gertrude at least once a week to check in, to give her someone to talk to. Gertrude had so few visitors. Really only Mildred, her housekeeper and caretaker, ever came to the cottage.

Realizing she would be chided for her three-minute tardiness, Holly put on a cheery face and gave a jovial knock before walking inside.

"I'm hee-eere," she called as she entered the parlor.

As usual, Gertrude sat rigidly in her straight-backed chair, stroking Leopold, the black miniature poodle who ate gourmet biscuits from his mistress's fingers. Holly was always amazed the dog wasn't two hundred pounds.

"I made some raisin bread for you." Holly held up the wrapped bundle.

"Put it over there," Gertrude demanded, pointing a withered finger in the direction of the table. "I'll have it with my tea when Mildred arrives this afternoon."

Holly took her usual spot on the button-backed couch with the scrolled wooden feet and clasped her hands in her lap. She never seemed well dressed enough in this house of antique furniture, of old lace draperies and doilies. Like something out of an Elizabeth Gaskell novel. No television, no computer, no technology at all—only basic electricity and running water. The cottage had an eighteenth-century atmosphere, and Holly supposed she should be wearing a flowing, high-waisted dress to better fit in. Along with some long, white gloves and a fan.

"How are you feeling today?" Holly said loudly, so she wouldn't have to repeat herself, as she normally did.

"You don't have to shout." Gertrude scowled. "I'm not deaf." She shifted uncomfortably, forcing Leopold to cling to her lap for dear life. "The weather change is making my knees worse, I can tell you that. And my hemorrhoids are back with a vengeance."

Now it was Holly's turn to shift uncomfortably, racking her brain for a valid enough excuse to leave earlier than planned.

"Tell me." Gertrude tapped her cane on the floor as a judge would a gavel. Commanding, arrogant. "Do you have a young man?"

The same question she asked Holly during *every* visit. So, Holly offered the same answer as every visit: "I'm too busy for that. Plus, I haven't found the right person yet."

As always, the answer wasn't good enough.

"Well, you're not getting any younger. How old are you now?"

"Almost twenty-eight."

"Remember, every tick of the clock is a minute closer to staying a spinster."

Holly bit the inside of her cheek to avoid a snide response. And a chuckle. The irony struck her. Gertrude had never married, yet there she was, lecturing Holly, judging her "spinsterhood."

Hypocrite, thy name is Gertrude...

Eager to change the subject, Holly remained undauntedly cheerful and leaned forward. "So, I have a delicious bit of news. I heard it from Mrs. Pickering yesterday."

"Do tell." Gertrude drew in, visibly eager for a generous piece of gossip to munch on later with her afternoon tea.

"Apparently, our little village is about to be famous. A film crew is going to set up at Chatsworth Manor and make a film. Isn't that exciting? The rumor is that it's *Emma*."

"*Emma*?" Gertrude crinkled her brow.

"Yes. Jane Austen. *Emma*. The matchmaker who pairs up people unsuccessfully?"

The look of confusion remained. "Never read it."

Holly sucked in a breath and unclasped her hands. "Oh, you *must* read it! Jane Austen's best work and my favorite book in the world since I was fourteen. My mother gave me my first copy. I've lost count of how many times I've read it."

"Humph," Gertrude said, raising her nose to the idea. She slipped another biscuit to Leopold, who snatched it greedily. "In my opinion, books are only for those who cannot think for themselves."

Holly's cheeks prickled with heat. She could accept the rude judgments of her social life, could even take being labeled "spinster"—but a lack of respect for books, for Jane Austen, and thus, for her own mother's memory? That was unacceptable.

"Well, in *my* opinion," Holly started, trying to contain the tremble in her voice, "those who detest literature have small minds and narrow views of the world. Jane Austen once said that. Or something like it."

Gertrude sat higher in her seat, face horrified, and said with another rap of her gavel, "Then this 'Jane Austen' is clearly a fool."

Holly stood and tried to breathe, remembering who she was talking to. A blood relative, an elder who deserved respect. She monitored her tone and kept it as even as possible. "Honestly, Gertrude, I think you're wrong. And to prove it to you, I think we should start a book club."

"A what?"

"And I think that our first book should be *Emma*."

"For goodness' sake, you have got to be—"

"And that this book club should meet right here. In Hickory Cottage. Once a week." For the first time in her life, Holly saw genuine panic on Gertrude's face. Holly took advantage of

the moment, reveling in her own boldness. "This will be the best way for you to decide if Jane Austen's work is trash or treasure. I'll round up some interested readers this week and we can have the first meeting on Monday. I'll take care of everything."

With that, Holly pivoted and headed for the door, half proud and half petrified of what had just happened. She knew the shocked expression would remain on Gertrude's face for the rest of the day. And something about that gave Holly a wicked rush of satisfaction.

* * * *

Fat drops of rain spattered above Holly's head, tap dancing on her green umbrella as she skipped over puddles. Storey Road, the cobblestoned main street of Chilton Crosse, glistened on rainy days, like a watercolor painting. Holly inhaled the dewy scent and browsed the street, savoring how the rain altered the quaint limestone shop-fronts from a pale sand color to a darker taupe. A stone gazebo stood in the middle of the road, usually occupied by tourists taking pictures or eating lunches. Holly always loved this view of the village: pristine shops lined up in a neat row, multicolored flowers peeking out of window boxes. All brought to life, even on a gloomy day.

She approached the art gallery, which was sandwiched between the post office and clock shop across from Joe's pub, and shook out her umbrella. Though Holly's father insisted she didn't need a job—she was busy enough looking after her sisters—she believed otherwise. It was important to earn her own money, to set a good example for her sisters. So, four years ago, Holly had filled out an application for part-time work and had been hired on the spot by the curator,

Frank O'Neill.

Today, Holly arrived early, thanks to her unusually fast escape from Gertrude's, and opened the gallery door, the sharp tinkling bell announcing her arrival.

She spotted the new piece immediately, a Bath landscape painted by the gallery's owner, Noelle Spencer. Noelle was the great-niece of the late Joy Valentine, the famous and ever-mysterious Cotswold artist, and original owner of the gallery. The first time Holly had seen a painting of Noelle's, she'd known the artistic talent had been completely genetic.

"Still raining?" Frank asked as he approached.

Holly twisted the dripping umbrella at her side to show him the answer then placed it inside the umbrella stand with a clink.

"Ahh. Probably why it's been so dead all morning." Frank rolled his brown eyes and scratched the top of his angular nose. His frame was slender, bordering on skinny, and he always wore the same ensemble to work—a dark jacket of either navy, brown, or black, perfectly creased trousers, a starched white shirt, and suspenders. As with Gertrude, Holly often felt underdressed in the presence of Frank—even today, with her flowing broomstick skirt and silver jewelry.

"What's on the agenda?" Holly asked, nudging aside a damp wave of auburn hair from her cheek.

Frank clasped his hands. "It's been slow, so I've done the paperwork already. Nothing left for you at the moment. Maybe you should even go home? With this weather, I doubt you'll have much to do here."

"No," Holly said. "I have a project for us."

She motioned for him to follow her back to the supply closet, where she paused and pulled a dozen sheets of printer paper from the shelf, along with a couple of thick black markers. "I'm starting a book club. So I need to make some posters to place around the village—at the pub, the bakery, even here, if that's okay."

Frank's expression was unreadable, and for a moment, she thought he would refuse. Or, lecture her for doing personal work on "company" time.

But then he asked, "What sort of book club?"

"It's *Emma*. In correlation with the film that's being shot at the Manor soon."

"Oh, I heard about that. Mary Cartwright mentioned it yesterday when she came in to look at Noelle's new painting. Terribly exciting!"

"Isn't it? And with this book club, we can be a small part of it, in our own way. What do you think?"

"Is it females only?"

Holly hadn't thought that far ahead. In her vision, she hadn't actually pictured any males sitting in Gertrude's parlor, discussing the social and romantic conundrums of early nineteenth-century British society. But why not?

"Anyone can join," she decided.

"Then count me in." He threaded his fingers together, his index fingers pointing at his chin, and got a faraway look. "Let's do this right, with the posters. No markers." He waved them away and sat at his laptop. "I can design them here, and we can print them off. I see big, bold letters with some sort of hook to reel them in, something eye-catching. Dramatic."

"Frank, you really don't need to do all that. It sounds like too much work," she protested.

Laptop already opened, he clicked on a blank document. "Nonsense. I'm good at this sort of thing. No trouble at all." He paused and brought his focus back to her. "One condition, though."

Holly stared suspiciously. "What?"

"That you say 'yes' to a night out. Nothing fancy, just supper at the pub."

She was aware of an awkward silence but didn't know how to fill it. Finally, she gathered her courage and asked—"This isn't a... date?"—then wished she hadn't. Awkward silence had been less awkward than that question.

During the last four years, Frank had dropped some incredibly subtle hints that he might be interested in her romantically. So subtle, in fact, that they were unverifiable. An occasional lingering look, or an extra smile—all things that could be interpreted as "friendly." No matter the case, sweet as he was, there wasn't a single molecule in her body that was attracted to Frank that way.

"Heavens, no," he said. "I just know that you rarely take a night off for yourself. And while we're at the pub together, putting up the posters, we could... have a spot of dinner. That's all."

"Oh."

"I bet you can't recall the last time you've been out by yourself. Without your sisters."

"That's true," she said. "I really can't."

"Then it's settled. A casual supper at the pub. It'll have to be tomorrow, after I close the gallery. We'll even go halves."

With that, she couldn't think of a single reason to turn him down. "Okay. Now, what can

I do to help with these?" She pulled up a chair beside him.

“Feed me some information about the book club—dates, address, those sorts of things—
and I’ll include it in the posters. Let’s advertise!”