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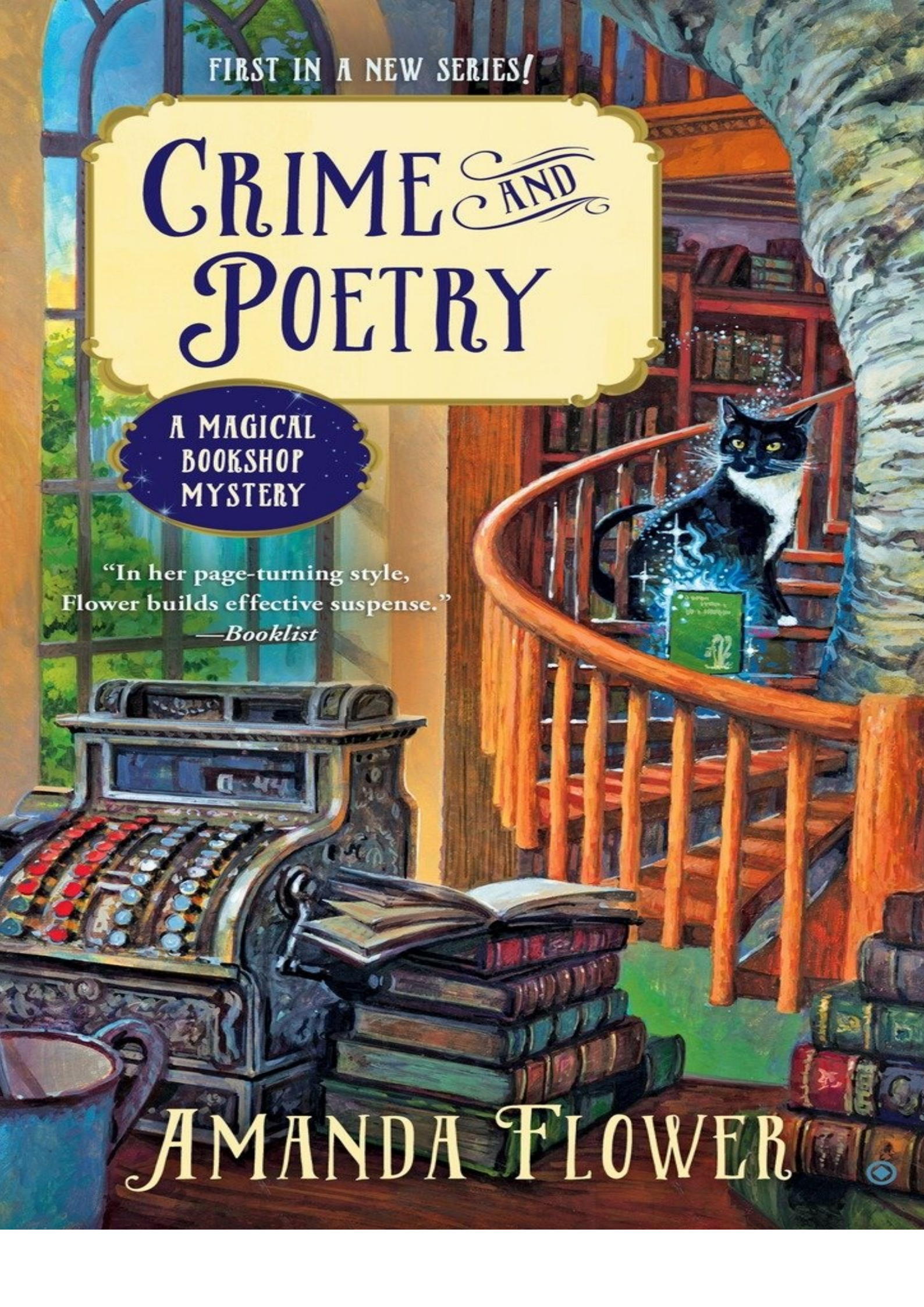
CRIME AND POETRY

A MAGICAL
BOOKSHOP
MYSTERY

“In her page-turning style,
Flower builds effective suspense.”

—*Booklist*

AMANDA FLOWER



Praise for Crime and Poetry

“An enchanting tale of mystery, magical books, and endearing characters. Prepare to be charmed.”
—Heather Blake, national bestselling author of *Some Like It Wicked*

Praise for the Amish Quilt Shop Mysteries by Amanda Flower Writing as Isabella Alan

“Alan writes the most captivating, fun mysteries!”
—Open Book Society

“A satisfyingly complex cozy.”
—*Library Journal*

“Alan captures Holmes County and the Amish life in a mystery that is nothing close to plain and simple.”
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“In the Amish Quilt Shop Mysteries, Isabella Alan captures the spirit of the Amish perfectly. . . . Throw in the *Englischers* living in Rolling Brook and the tourists visiting, and you have a great host of colorful characters.”
—Cozy Mystery Book Review

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—P. L. Gaus, author of the Amish-Country Mysteries

“This is a community you’d like to visit, a shop where you’d find welcome . . . and people you’d want for friends. . . . There’s a lot of interesting information about Amish life, but it’s interwoven into the story line so the reader learns details as Angie does.”
—Kings River Life Magazine

“Cozy readers and Amish enthusiasts alike will be raving about this debut. It proves to be a great start for Isabella Alan.”
—Debbie’s Book Blog

CRIME AND POETRY

A Magical Bookshop Mystery



AMANDA FLOWER



AN OBSIDIAN MYSTERY



OBSIDIAN

Published by New American Library,
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014

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eBook ISBN 9780698410213

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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*for Laura Fazio,
for believing in the magic of books and me*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have always thought books were magical, so when I was given the chance to write a mystery series set in a magical bookshop, I took it. Thank you to my dream editor, Laura Fazio, for giving me this opportunity. We create some awesome cozy worlds together no matter the setting. Thanks also to my agent and dear friend, Nicole Resciniti, who is the best and kindest person in the book business.

Special thanks to my readers who have followed me to yet another series. Your love of my mysteries keeps me writing. I've taken you from the Amish world to a Civil War reenactment to a magical place, and still you read on. Thank you! I promise wherever we go, a funny mystery will be found.

Hugs to my dear friend Mariellyn Grace, who is my plotter in crime and has saved every book from destruction. Thanks to my beta reader, Molly Carroll, who reassured me that my ideas for this book made sense even before they did, and to Suzy Schroeder and Bobby Boos for helping me to craft the "rules" for my magical world. Thanks also to Sarah Preston and Suzy for a girls' trip to Niagara Falls so I could go on location.

Love to my family, Andy, Nicole, Isabella, and Andrew, for their unfailing support of my big dreams.

Finally to my Heavenly Father, thanksgiving for an incredibly unexpected year.

*Because I could not stop for Death,
He kindly stopped for me;
The carriage held but just ourselves
And Immortality.*

—EMILY DICKINSON



ONE



“Grandma! Grandma Daisy!” I called as soon as I was inside Charming Books. There were books everywhere—on the crowded shelves, the end tables, the sales counter, and the floor. Everywhere. But there was no sign of my ailing grandmother.

Browsing customers in brightly colored T-shirts and shorts stared at me openmouthed. I knew I must have looked a fright. I had driven from Chicago to Cascade Springs, New York, a small village nestled on the banks of the Niagara River just minutes from the world-famous Niagara Falls. I’d made the drive in seven hours, stopping only twice for gas and potty breaks. My fingernails were bitten to the quick, dark circles hovered beneath my bloodshot blue eyes, and my wavy strawberry blond hair was in a knot on top of my head. Last time I caught sight of it in the rearview mirror, it had resembled a pom-pom that had been caught in a dryer’s lint trap. I stopped looking in the rearview after that.

A crow gripping a perch in the shop’s large bay window cawed.

I jumped, and my hands flew to my chest. I had thought the crow was stuffed.

The bird glared at me with his beady black eyes. He certainly wasn’t stuffed. “Grandma Daisy!” he mimicked me. “Grandma!”

I sidestepped away from the black bird. I thought parrots were the only birds that could talk. The crow was the only one who spoke. None of the customers made a peep. A few slipped out the front door behind me. “Escape from the crazy lady” was written all over their faces. I couldn’t say I blame them.

A slim woman stepped out from between packed bookshelves. She wore jeans, a hot pink T-shirt with the bookshop’s logo on it, and, despite the summer’s heat, a long silken scarf. Silk scarves were Grandma Daisy’s signature. I could count on one hand the number of times I had seen her without one intricately tied around her neck. Today’s scarf was white with silver-dollar-sized ladybugs marching across it. Her straight silver hair was cut in a sleek bob that fell to her chin. Cat’s-eye-shaped glasses perched on her nose. She was a woman in her seventies, but clearly someone who took care of herself. Clearly someone who was not dying.

My mouth fell open, and I knew I must look a lot like those tourists I’d frightened. “Grandma!” The word came out of my mouth somewhere between a curse and a prayer.

“Violet, my girl.” She haphazardly dropped the pile of books she had in her arms onto one of the two matching couches in the middle of the room at the base of the birch tree, which seemed to grow

out of the floor. “You came!”

I stepped back. “Of course I came. You were *dying*.”

More customers skirted for the door. They knew what was good for them. I wouldn't have hung around either. The only one who seemed to be enjoying the show was the crow. He was no longer in the front window, but on the end table to my right. Great. A crow was loose in my grandmother's bookshop. I wished I could say this surprised me, but it didn't.

Grandma Daisy chuckled. “Oh, that.”

““Oh, that”? That's all you can say?” I screeched. “Do you have any idea what you've put me through? I left school. I left my job. I left *everything* to be with you at your deathbed.”

Grandma had the decency to wince.

“Look at you. You look like you are ready to run a marathon. When I spoke to you on the phone last night, you were coughing and gasping. You sounded like you were at death's door.”

Grandma Daisy faked a cough. “Like this?” Her face morphed into pathetic. “Oh, Violet, I need you. Please come.” Fake cough. Fake cough. “The doctor said I don't have much more time.”

Heat surged up from the base of my neck to the top of my head. I couldn't remember the last time I had been this angry. Oh yeah, I did—it was the first time I'd left Cascade Springs, twelve years ago. I had promised myself that day I would never come back, and look where I was, back in Cascade Springs, tricked by my very own grandmother.

“You were dying,” the crow said.

“Quiet, Faulkner,” Grandma Daisy ordered.

The large black bird sidestepped across the tabletop. Seemed that the crow was a new addition to the shop. It'd been twelve years, but I would have remembered Faulkner. I wondered why Grandma Daisy had never mentioned the bird. I would have thought a talking pet crow would have made a great conversation piece.

Grandma Daisy searched my face. “I may have fibbed a bit. Can you forgive me?” she asked, giving me her elfish smile. It wasn't going to work, not this time.

I spun around, ignored Faulkner, who was spouting “You were dying!” over and over again, and stomped out of the shop.

Behind me the screen door smacked against the doorframe. I stumbled across the front porch and gripped the whitewashed wooden railing. Charming Books (“where the perfect book picks you”) sat in the center of River Road in the middle of Old Town Cascade Springs, a historic part of the village that was on the National Historic Landmarks list. Every house and small business on the street was more adorable than the last, but none were as stunning as Charming Books, a periwinkle Queen Anne Victorian with gingerbread to spare and a wraparound porch that was twice the size of my studio apartment back in Chicago.

The tiny front yard was full to bursting with blooming roses and, of course, daisies—Grandma's personal favorite. On the brick road in front of me, gas lampposts lined the street on either side and prancing horses and white carriages waited at the curbs, ready to take tourists for a spin around the village and along the famous Riverwalk at a moment's notice. The horses' manes were elaborately braided with satiny ribbons, and their drivers wore red coats with tails and top hats.

It was charming. It was perfect. It was the last place on planet Earth I wanted to be.

I had half a mind to jump in my car and head west for Chicago, never looking back. I couldn't do that. My shoulders slumped. I was so incredibly tired. Coffee wouldn't be any help. Coffee had lost its ability to keep me alert my third year of grad school. And as much as she vexed me, I couldn't leave Grandma Daisy without saying good-bye. For better or worse, she was all the family I had left in the

world. And then, there was the whole pom-pom hair situation, which could be tolerated for only so long. I'd need a hairbrush and maybe a blowtorch to get that under control.

The screen door to the Queen Anne creaked open. I didn't have to turn around to know it was my grandmother. The scent of lavender talcum powder that always surrounded her floated on the breeze. "Violet, I know it wasn't right for me to lie to you."

I folded my arms, refusing to look at her. I knew it was childish, but I was going on two hours of sleep and tons of betrayal. Being a grown-up wasn't on the top of my priority list.

She placed her hand on my shoulder. "It was wrong of me. Very wrong, but it was the only way I could convince you to come back here."

She was probably right in that assumption, but I wasn't going to make it easy for her. "So you pretended to be dying?"

She let out a breath. "What I said about needing you to come back was true. I do need you here. I want you to stay."

She had to be kidding. She knew what had happened to me in this town. She knew why I'd left the day after I graduated high school. She knew better than anyone. "Well, that's too bad," I said. "I'm not staying."

"Can't you stay a little while? For me?"

I felt a pang in my heart. I didn't want to leave Grandma Daisy, and despite the whole lying thing, was wonderful to see her, but I couldn't stay. It was too hard. "I'll wait until tomorrow, but I'll leave in the morning."

Of course that last statement came to be known as "famous last words."



TWO



“Well, then,” Grandma Daisy said, her face breaking into a smile. “You should come inside, and I’ll fetch you a cold drink.”

My shoulders slumped in defeat. She got me, and she got me good. “Okay.”

I followed Grandma Daisy back inside the shop. We were the only ones there besides Faulkner the crow.

I nodded at Faulkner. “What’s up with the crow?”

She chuckled. “He showed up in the garden during the winter with a broken wing. He was a young bird then, barely more than a chick. I nursed him back to health, and he decided to stay. Every bookshop needs a mascot.”

“What’s wrong with a cat?”

“You know I’m not a traditionalist,” she said with a smile.

I frowned as I looked around the shop. “I’m sorry I scared away all your customers.”

She smoothed her silky bob. “It’s no matter. If they needed something, it would have found them.”

My eyes slid to her. “You mean they were just browsers?”

She gave a small smile. “You could call them that.”

I wanted to ask her what that meant, but she scurried away, muttering about lemonade. As Charming Books was an old converted house, there was a full kitchen in the back. I almost followed her, but my surroundings stopped me. Charming Books was, well, charming. There was something about it that was beguiling. I had been to dozens of other bookstores in my life and never felt the same jolt of wonder as I did while in my grandmother’s shop. It was a feeling of warmth and understanding I got as I looked around the room, like the books were alive and old friends. I knew that was ridiculous, and I would never say that aloud to anyone. The villagers of Cascade Springs thought I was a lot of things. I didn’t need to add peculiar to an already lengthy list.

Now that I wasn’t blinded by the fear I would find my grandmother dead, I was able to take in my surroundings. The bookshop looked exactly as I remembered it. A vaulted ceiling spanned half the room, stopping in the center of the shop at a metal spiral staircase that led to the second floor. The staircase wrapped itself around a live birch tree with three trunks, each as thick as a grown man. Once a year, grandmother had a tree service come in to prune the tree so that it didn’t break through the historic building’s slate roof. Currently, its branches stopped six inches from the ceiling.

Sunlight poured into the shop from the windows and the large skylight on the second floor and reflected off the birch tree's white, silver-flecked bark. The tree, just like the house, had belonged to my family for generations, since my ancestress Rosalee Waverly built the home at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Although the structure had shifted over the last two hundred years, the most notable change occurred at the turn of the twentieth century when one of Rosalee's descendants transformed the home into a Queen Anne Victorian, as was the fashion at that time.

At the top of the staircase, I could see through the black iron railing into the children's room, which was decorated as a wood sprite's palace that would have put Tinker Bell to shame. It had been the perfect place to hide during my mother's chemo treatments.

For the moment, I would have to wait to visit the fairy room. Faulkner the crow stared at me from one of the tree's branches as if daring me to climb the stairs. I wasn't up to facing him. I hadn't been the least bit surprised that my grandma had nursed Faulkner back to health. When I was a child, she had a revolving door of injured and sick animals going through her house. She was just kindhearted. I sighed. If she was that kindhearted, why would she lie to me, her own granddaughter, about being sick? What was so important that made her want me to move back to Cascade Springs? Part of me was afraid to ask, because Grandma Daisy could be very convincing when she wanted to be, and apparently, after the "I'm dying" speech over the phone, she could be quite an actress too.

It was beginning to ebb, but adrenaline still pulsed in my veins from fear that Grandma Daisy was ill. Even though I hadn't been back to Cascade Springs since I was seventeen, I saw my grandmother at least twice a year. She visited me in Chicago for Christmas, and every year we met somewhere in the world for our annual girls' trip. People might think it was odd I vacationed with my grandmother but those people didn't have a grandmother like mine. I was the one ready to call it a day at eleven. Grandma could party the whole night through. Last year, she drank me under the table in São Paolo.

The front bell jangled, notifying the shop that someone had entered. Grandma Daisy rushed past me with a tray holding a lemonade pitcher and glasses. She shoved a sweaty glass of lemonade into my hand on her way to greet her customer.

As beautifully crafted and enchanting as the shop itself was, the books were the most eye-catching aspect. They were everywhere. Along the walls, bookshelves rose eleven feet high. In the middle of the room, much shorter shelves held even more volumes, and soft chairs were tucked in every corner for a quiet place to get lost in a book.

I walked around the shop, sliding my finger across the spines of all the lovely books. Charming Books had been the place where I had fallen in love with literature. When I was a child, I ran here every day after school, eager to see what new novels and plays my grandmother had in stock. Back then, I daydreamed of running the shop myself one day, and helping shoppers find the perfect book for themselves and their family or friends. That was before. Now I poured my love of the written word into my PhD program in American literature. After years of scholarship, I was one dissertation away from my culminating degree, and after that, who knew what would happen? I'd started submitting my *vita* to colleges and universities, but as of yet haven't yielded much more than a lukewarm reception to it. In the world of academe, a PhD in literature was easy to come by and the competition was fierce for the few open professor jobs in the country. I wasn't panicking. Or at least I wasn't panicking yet.

I heard muffled voices as Grandma Daisy chatted with the shopper about a book, and I smiled at the sound of her energetic voice. Nothing made my grandmother happier than talking about books. I stepped out from the bookshelves and found Grandma with a white-haired man in riding pants and a red jacket with tails. His riding boots were polished to a high sheen, and he tucked his black top hat under his arm. His and my grandmother's heads were suspiciously close together, much closer than in

a typical bookseller-and-buyer transaction.

I cleared my throat.

Grandma Daisy jumped back from the man. “Oh, Violet, you gave me a start.”

The man beamed at me. He had straight white teeth that sparkled against his tanned skin. “You’re Violet. I’ve heard so much about you. I’m so glad to finally meet you. My, aren’t you the spitting image of Daisy?”

I wasn’t so sure about that. I still had the crazy pom-pom do on the top of my head. It couldn’t have been more different from my grandmother’s sleek and smooth bob. I frowned. “I haven’t heard about you.” Usually, I was a much friendlier person, but it was hard to be polite with a crow looming over you.

He laughed. “I see you get your spunk from Daisy too.” He held out his free hand. “I’m Benedict Raisin, the best carriage driver in Cascade Springs or on either side of the Niagara River. Don’t let anyone else tell you different.”

I shook his hand and smiled despite myself. “Nice to meet you.” Self-consciously, I touched my hair. “I have to apologize for my appearance. I just arrived.”

“Aww, what’s to apologize for? I thought that’s how all the young girls wear their hair nowadays,” he said, releasing my hand.

I laughed.

“There, now, I see you have your grandmother’s beautiful smile too.”

I glanced at Grandma Daisy, and her cheeks pinkened. My suspicion returned. Who was this guy, and why was my grandma acting like a twelve-year-old girl with a crush around him?

“How do you two know each other?” I asked.

“He’s a customer,” Grandma Daisy said a little too quickly.

A customer? Just a customer? I wasn’t buying it.

Benedict chuckled. “Seems to me you’ve been in the big city far too long. Everyone knows everyone in our little village.” He dusted off the top of his hat. “I’m one of Daisy’s *best* customers. I’m here to restock on my reading material. Being a carriage driver means that ninety percent of my time is spent waiting for the next tourist. It’s good to have a book handy for the slow times of the day.”

“What are you looking for?” I was always interested in what people were reading.

He cocked his head. “I’m not sure. I do like action. A good thriller keeps the blood pumping in my old ticker.” He rested a hand to his chest. “Poor old thing doesn’t work quite as well as it used to, but get by.”

Grandma Daisy smiled. “Don’t let Benedict fool you; he is the picture of health.” She turned back to her friend. “Why don’t you browse a bit? Would you like some lemonade?”

“I never turn down your lemonade, Daisy.”

Again, I looked from Benedict to my grandmother and back again. There was definitely more to their relationship than my grandmother wanted me to know.

Grandma Daisy went to the tray on the counter and poured Benedict a generous serving of lemonade.

“Your grandmother tells me you’re studying literature,” he said.

I nodded. “At the University of Chicago. I’m working on my dissertation in Transcendentalist literature.”

He frowned as if he wasn’t sure what I was talking about. I got that look a lot when speaking about my dissertation. I supposed it wasn’t a good time to share my interpretation of *Walden*.

“You must have gotten your love of books from Daisy,” he said.

I smiled. “I did. In fact, if it weren’t for Gran—”

A book flew off the shelf and nailed Benedict on the kneecap and fell open.

“Ouch,” he cried.

“Where on earth did that come from?” I searched the room for Faulkner. I half expected the crow to be responsible for the projectile book. I was wrong. Faulkner sat silently in the tree, not moving a feather. He made eye contact with me, and I was the one who looked away.

Benedict leaned over to pick up the book. “Oh my. Emily Dickinson. You know I used to be a bit of a poetry buff as a young man. Here’s my chance to brush up a little. I have always enjoyed Dickinson’s ‘The Carriage,’” he said, reading the poem that the book had fallen open to. “Doesn’t that sound like the perfect poem for me?”

“I’m a fan of Dickinson myself,” I said. “She was a contemporary with many of the Transcendentalist writers.”

He cocked his head as if he considered that bit of information. “It will do me good to get some culture, then. It’s been a long time since I read anything without an explosion in it. This seems to be a good place to start.” He read from the book,

*“Because I could not stop for Death,
He kindly stopped for me;
The carriage held but just ourselves
And Immortality.”*

He frowned. “It’s not the most cheerful verse in the world.”

“Emily wasn’t all rainbows and sunshine,” I said.

“Apparently not.” He laughed.

Grandma Daisy abandoned the lemonade and hurried over to him. “This must be some kind of mistake.”

Benedict and I both raised our eyebrows at her.

She cleared her throat and reached for the volume of poetry in Benedict’s hands. “I mean, there are so many newer novels that you haven’t read. Why don’t we find something else for you? Dickinson is all right, but I’m sure I could find you something else that you would like even more.”

Benedict stepped back from her. “But I want to read this one. Poetry is food for the soul.”

Grandma Daisy took another step toward him. “What about some Tom Clancy? James Patterson? I’m sure James has published five books since you were last in the shop. He’s so prolific. I know those are both your favorites.”

I set my lemonade on an end table. “Grandma, why are you trying to talk someone out of reading a classic American poet?”

She turned to me, and there was a strange look in her eyes. Was it fear? Fear of what? A book?

My grandmother may have claimed to be the image of health, but maybe she wasn’t. Maybe she wasn’t right in the head if someone buying a collection of Emily Dickinson’s poetry freaked her out. The thought made me shiver.

“Daisy, don’t be silly. I have always wanted to read this. It will keep me company as I wait for my customers.” He lifted the book in his hand. “Considering its size, it will keep me occupied for some time. I’ll just take this one today.”

Grandma Daisy chewed the pink lipstick off her lower lip. “If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.” He smiled good-naturedly. “Now, I must be returning to my post. Let’s ring this up.” He wagged his finger at Grandma Daisy. “And before you say it, I insist on paying for the book.”

My grandmother and Benedict moved across the huge Oriental rug that covered two-thirds of the shop floor. He had a bounce in his step, and Grandma Daisy dragged her feet.

After she’d rung him up, Grandma Daisy watched him stroll out of the store. She bit her lip, and I might have been mistaken, but I thought I saw tears in her eyes.



THREE



I'd arrived in Cascade Springs in the early evening, but as we were just days from the summer solstice, the sun was still high in the sky.

"Why don't I close early tonight so we can catch up?" Grandma Daisy said. "I don't do much business on Monday evenings anyway, even in the summer."

She moved toward the front door, but before she could close it, a young woman bounced in. She wore a white sundress dotted with red and blue hearts, bright red lipstick, and saddle shoes, and her silky black hair was tied back into a high ponytail with a red ribbon. She clapped her hands. "Is she here?" She bounced—and I do mean bounced—with excitement.

Grandma Daisy grinned. "Sadie, I would like you to meet my granddaughter, Violet. Violet, this is Sadie Cunningham."

The small woman skipped over to me and gave me a surprisingly strong hug. "I can't believe I'm finally meeting you. Daisy talks of nothing else. She's always telling me how brilliant you are, but she never said how beautiful. Look at that hair and skin! I would kill for skin like yours. I guess you won't be needing the spa while you're here. And OMG, I love your T-shirt."

I looked down at myself. I was wearing flip-flops, yoga pants, and a Strawberry Shortcake T-shirt, all chosen for comfort for a cross-country drive. It wasn't my best look.

She put her small hands on her narrow hips. "Were you trying to achieve a beehive with your hair?" She squinted at me. "I can give you tips on how to make it a little straighter. It's all about the hair spray."

Grandma Daisy smiled as she picked up books customers had left lying around the shop. "Sadie knows everything about fashion."

Sadie beamed. "I own Midcentury Vintage across the street." She pointed at a small yellow cottage with lime green shutters on the opposite corner from Charming Books. Midcentury Vintage had a good view of the Niagara River and the Riverwalk, which was filling up with tourists out to dinner. My grandmother's shop sat on the curve on the L-shaped River Road where it turned west and started following the Niagara River out of the village and in the direction of the Falls. There was another house to the south of Charming Books, but to the north and east, it was surrounded by the village park. Over the generations, my family had owned the land on the edge of the park and many had tried to purchase it for access to the village's famous springs.

Remembering my manners, I turned to Sadie and said, "It's nice to meet you too."

She clapped her hands. "Well, I'd better be off and let the two of you visit. I just *had* to pop over and meet you!" She spun around and her ponytail flew out like a flag. Over her shoulder, she said, "Daisy, don't forget—Red Inkers meets tomorrow night! I can't wait. David is reading his next chapter. It will be *amazing*." With that, she bounced out of the store.

After she left, I looked to Grandma Daisy. "Red Inkers?"

"It's a local writers' group. I let them meet here in the evenings once or twice a week. They're an interesting bunch. You should hang around the Springs to meet them."

I gave her a lopsided smile. "Nice try. I know you're trying to trick me into staying in Cascade Springs longer."

"Is it wrong for a grandmother to want her only grandchild close to her?"

I sighed. "No, it's not wrong, but it's not going to change anything either."

"It was so long—"

I shook my head. "Please, Grandma, I don't want to talk about it. I left because I didn't want to talk about it. That hasn't changed."

She didn't say another word about the incident, but I knew by the way her brow wrinkled above her cat's-eye glasses that this conversation wasn't over.

After we closed up the shop, I left my Mini Cooper parked on River Road, and Grandma Daisy and I walked to her row house one block over on another perfectly picturesque Cascade Springs street with iron lampposts dotted with hanging flower baskets.

"Before we go in the house, I have something to show you." She smiled brightly. "It's a surprise."

I narrowed my eyes. "Is this like an I'm-not-really-dying surprise? Because I don't need a repeat of that."

She chuckled. "No, you will like this one." Grandma Daisy ran into the garage through the back door and came out with a huge gift bag. "Open it."

I took the bag from her hand and riffled through the tissue paper until I came up with an aqua bike helmet with white and purple violets painted all over it. I blinked.

"One of the artists from the arts district painted it for me." She beamed. "What do you think?"

I swallowed. "It certainly stands out."

"Try it on," she said.

I placed the helmet on my head and adjusted the strap under my chin.

"Adorable."

I felt about as adorable as a thirteen-year-old with braces and headgear.

"Everyone will know it's yours." She smiled. "Do you like it?" She looked so hopeful.

I gave her a big smile. "I love it. It was so thoughtful." I paused. "But I don't understand. Why would you give me this? I don't own a bike."

"Sure you do." She winked at me. "You have your mother's bike."

I froze. "My mother's bike?"

Grandma Daisy grinned. "I had it tuned up for you, so you could use it during your visit or if you decide to stay in the village."

"I'm not—"

She cut me off. "Do you want to see it?"

I did.

Grandma Daisy punched in the garage door code in the keypad on the side of the garage, and the door opened. Grandma's ancient compact car was parked inside, but behind it, just waiting to be

ridden, was my mother's bicycle.

I touched the white seat. It was an aqua-colored cruiser bike and had a pink wire basket with a pink silk gerbera daisy on the front. It looked like new. Mom's bicycle had been the only way she'd gotten around. She'd hated to drive and said she could reach every corner on the village on her bike. If I closed my eyes, I could see her riding along the river, her strawberry blond hair flying behind her like a banner.

A tear leaked out of the corner of my right eye. It was such a thoughtful gesture by my grandmother, but I knew I still couldn't stay in the village. It just wasn't possible.

After our dinner, I made excuses and went to bed in my old bedroom at the top of the stairs. Grandma Daisy simply nodded as if distracted by something, but I was too tired to ask her what it was. As I stumbled up the stairs, I promised myself I would ask in the morning. I crashed into the bed fully dressed, completely exhausted from the day.

Because I had gone to bed so early, I woke up at three, four, and five in the morning. Each time I forgot where I was and I reached across the bed for my cat, Jane Eyre. When I remembered she was gone, it made my heart ache for my beloved tabby, who'd passed away from old age in the spring. Jane Eyre had been with me when I'd left Cascade Springs the first time. It was strange not to have her with me now. I knew it was time that I adopted a new kitten. I missed having someone greet me at my apartment door after a long night of studying in the university library, but a little part of me was worried that that would feel like replacing her.

I took a shower and dressed before padding barefoot downstairs. Grandma Daisy was still in bed, but she would be up soon. She rose every morning at six forty-five on the dot and had woken up at that time for as long as I could remember.

In the tiny kitchen, I started a pot of coffee. I found the mugs, spoons, and coffee filters. Everything was in the exact place it had been on the day I left Cascade Springs. Maybe I should have found that eerie, but instead, I found it comforting.

I drummed my fingers on the counter while the coffee brewed, and when there was just enough for one serving, I poured a mug of it from the pot while the coffeemaker was still percolating.

Cupping the mug in my hands, I peered through the window over my grandma's flower basket bursting with purple petunias. I blinked. Outside, a horse and carriage was parked in the middle of Grandma Daisy's driveway.

I stared at the ceiling. Did Grandma Daisy have a guest? I hadn't heard anyone else in the house last night, but I'd basically passed out before my head hit the pillow. I set my mug on the counter and started for the front door. I unlocked it and stepped outside.

I tiptoed through the thick grass, damp with dew. My toes curled from the cold. I came around the side of the house to the driveway toward the carriage. The horse turned his head to look back at me as much as his harness would allow. He stamped the driveway and blew mist from his nose. The back of the carriage where guests would sit was empty, but a white-haired man sat straight up in the driver's seat.

"Can I help you?" I called.

He didn't turn around.

"Sir?"

Still nothing.

I rushed to the front of the carriage and found it was Benedict Raisin. "Benedict?" I asked.

He didn't say a word. He didn't move a muscle. His eyes were closed, and his arms were over his chest, holding something.

“Benedict?” I reached up into the carriage and touched his arm, noticing that Grandma Daisy’s ladybug scarf was wrapped tightly around his neck. He slumped over in the seat, falling onto his right side. I squealed. It was Benedict all right, and he was dead. In death, he clutched *The Selected Works of Emily Dickinson*, the book he’d purchased from Charming Books, to his chest.

When I stopped screaming, I ran back into the house to call 911 and wake up Grandma Daisy.

“Grandma! Grandma!”

Grandma Daisy was just coming down the stairs when I stormed into the house. “Violet, what in the devil has gotten into you?”

I stubbed my toe on an end table but ignored the pain surging up my foot. “Benedict.” I pointed to the open front door. “He’s out there.”

She stepped over to me. “He is? What’s he doing here so early? Did you ask him?”

“I couldn’t ask him.” I took a deep breath. “Grandma, Benedict is dead.”

She pressed a hand to her forehead. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” I bent over at the waist to catch my breath.

Tears filled her dark eyes. “I was afraid of this. This is exactly what I was afraid of.”

I didn’t have time to ask her what she meant because the sounds of sirens announced the police and ambulances’ arrival. I went out to meet them.

An EMT, who looked like he was in middle school, approached me. “Who needs help, ma’am?”

I swallowed. “In the front seat of the carriage. H-he fell over.”

The EMT and two others ran to the front of the carriage. I stared after them. I was frozen in place on the lawn. I no longer cared my bare feet were wet and getting colder by the second. How could this be happening to me again? I’d left Cascade Springs twelve years ago to escape something just like this. I was back less than twenty-four hours, and it had happened again. Was I cursed? One thing I knew, the universe was telling me to get the heck out of Cascade Springs, New York.

“Miss?” A man in a police uniform stood in front of me. “I’m Officer Wheaton of the village police.”

I blinked at the scowling officer just a few years younger than me. His hair was buzz-cut and he wore mirrored sunglasses, making it impossible for me to see his eyes.

“Miss, would you like to tell me what happened?”

I wiped tears from my cheeks. “I—I don’t know.”

“You were the one who discovered the body.” Officer Wheaton said this more than asked it.

I nodded.

“How did it happen?”

I ran my hands up and down my arms. “I was in the kitchen making coffee, and I saw Benedict’s carriage, so I came out to say hello to him and see if he needed anything. And I found him.” I swallowed. “Like that.”

“So you know who the victim is, even though I’ve never seen you around Cascade Springs before.” He said it as if he expected this.

I nodded. “Benedict Raisin. He was a sweet old man. I met him yesterday. He liked books.” I don’t know why I added that last part onto my summary of Benedict. Maybe I wanted the officer to know that he was more than just a dead body.

“And you were staying here with Daisy Waverly?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“And who might you be?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m her granddaughter, Violet Waverly. I’m visiting my grandmother. I

was supposed to leave today.”

A flicker of recognition lit his eyes, but as quickly as it came, it disappeared. “My advice is that you stick around here for a while to be with your grandmother.” He gave me a stern look as if he was deciding whether he could trust me. “I’m going to check on the scene, but I’m going to want to talk to you and your grandmother again. Okay?”

I nodded as he strode away. I looked back at the house. Grandma Daisy stood in the doorway, but she didn’t cross the threshold. She’d draped a blanket over her body and had it wrapped around her like a cocoon.

I hurried up the porch steps to my grandmother. “Grandma, are you okay?” I knew it was a stupid question as soon as it popped out of my mouth. Of course, Grandma Daisy wasn’t okay. I didn’t know exactly what her relationship with Benedict had been, but I knew it was more than a friendship. And it wasn’t the right time to ask her about it.

I wrapped my arms around her, and she buried her face in my shoulder. We had stood that way so many years ago when my mother had died. Back then, the roles had been reversed, and I had been the one crying in her arms.

“I knew this would happen,” she mumbled. “I hoped that I was wrong. I hoped that the book was wrong, but I knew this would happen.”

“The book?” I asked. “What are you talking about?”

Grandma Daisy didn’t get the chance to answer, because a luxury car pulled up at the curb and a man in a gray summer suit jumped out. The morning sunlight reflected off his golden hair, which was perfectly styled. He moved through the police easily. They gave him plenty of space.

My heart constricted, and my mouth ran dry. I blinked a couple of times, hoping that I was just imagining the person talking to Officer Wheaton. No such luck. When my vision cleared, he was still there.

He nodded at something Officer Wheaton said and his head turned sharply to the porch, where Grandma Daisy and I huddled together. His dark, stony gaze focused on me. I stared back. I hadn’t seen or spoken to my high school sweetheart, Nathan Morton, since the day I left the village twelve years ago.

“What’s he doing here?” I hissed to Grandma Daisy.

“Violet,” my grandmother whispered back, “he’s the mayor of Cascade Springs.”

The *mayor*?

Great. Just great.



FOUR



I tore my eyes away from Nathan. “Why would the mayor come to the scene of an accident?” I asked after finding my voice.

Grandma Daisy adjusted the blanket on her shoulders. “I’m sure he heard about it.”

“But why is he here?” I hissed. “Do you think the mayor of Chicago shows up every time someone dies?”

Grandma Daisy’s mouth shaped into an O. “No, I suppose that the mayor of Chicago doesn’t, but things like this don’t happen in Cascade Springs. Nothing like this has happened since—” She caught herself before finishing the sentence.

“Since I left,” I finished it for her. With every mental faculty I had, I pushed the memories of twelve years ago back to the darkest, most hidden corner of my brain. I would not let my mind wander there, especially not with Nathan so close.

Nathan conferred with Officer Wheaton. The pair had their heads together, Nathan’s golden blond, Officer Wheaton’s buzzed to almost bald. It did not take a genius to know that they were talking about Grandma Daisy and me.

Grandma Daisy pulled away from me. “I want to see him.”

“Nathan?” I asked.

She wiped a tear from her cheek. “Benedict.”

I pulled my attention away from the two men talking on the tree lawn. “Wh-what?”

She removed the blanket from her shoulders and folded it. “I want to see him.” She tossed the blanket on the white rocker beside the front door and marched down the porch steps and to the driveway.

I tripped down the steps after her, wishing I had taken time to put on my shoes.

“Wait!” Officer Wheaton called.

By the time the officer caught up to us, Grandma Daisy was already beside the carriage. Her hand covered her mouth as she saw Benedict for the first time. She lowered her hand. “I knew it was the book. The books never lie.”

I glanced around, hoping that I was the only one who heard her say that.

“Ms. Waverly,” Officer Wheaton said, slightly out of breath. “You can’t come over here. This area is quartered off as a crime scene.”

Grandma Daisy adjusted her glasses and wrinkled her nose. Uh-oh. “Johnny Wheaton, my friend is dead. I have a right to see my friend’s body on my own property.”

“This is a crime scene, and—”

She pointed at him. “And nothing. Now, please give me a moment.”

The two crime scene techs were frozen in place on the carriage and looked to Officer Wheaton for guidance.

“Just give her a couple of minutes, boys,” a voice said only a few paces behind me.

Officer Wheaton’s jaw twitched before he finally nodded. “Guys, you heard the mayor.”

The two techs climbed out of the carriage and went over to their truck, which was sticking out of the end of the driveway.

To my grandmother, Officer Wheaton ordered, “Don’t touch anything.”

She nodded and stepped closer to the front of the carriage. She was still a good five feet away.

Against my better judgment, I turned around to face the mayor. He had his arms folded across his chest as he watched me. If anything, Nathan Morton was more handsome than he had been in high school. Age agreed with him. His signature golden hair was the same, but his features were sharper. Dark brown eyes sat behind heavy lashes with just the beginning of laugh lines splaying out from the corners. Long gone was any sign of boyhood, and I had known Nathan the boy. The man in front of me was a stranger. As I studied him, I came to the realization that he studied me right back. A blush crept onto my cheeks.

Nathan nodded to me. “Violet, I didn’t expect to see you again.”

I straightened and looked him in the eye. “It’s nice to see you too, Nate.”

“From what I’ve heard, you never visit Cascade Springs. Ever.”

Had he been asking Grandma Daisy about me? That didn’t matter. I didn’t care, or that’s what I told myself. “I’m here for a couple of days to see my grandma,” I said.

He glanced over my shoulder at Grandma Daisy. I looked behind me to see that her head was bent and her lips moved as if she was whispering a prayer.

“You should visit her more often.” His tone held a hint of criticism. “You’re all she has.”

I gritted my teeth. Of anyone in the entire world, Nathan Morton had no right to criticize me, not after what he’d done. I bit back the words before they escaped my mouth.

“What do you know about your grandmother’s friend?” He nodded at the carriage.

“Very little. Like I told Officer Wheaton a few minutes ago, I met him yesterday.”

“Your grandmother seems to care about him a lot.” He raised his eyebrows.

I clenched my jaw a little harder. “He was her friend. Of course she’s upset.”

He opened his mouth as if to say something more, but then thought better of it. It seemed that both of us were holding back. There had been a time when we told each other everything. That time was long gone.

I folded my arms and matched his stance. “What are you doing here, Nathan?”

“I’m the mayor of Cascade Springs.” He said this as if he were claiming to be the Dalai Lama, not the mayor of a Western New York village of just under five thousand souls.

“I heard, but that doesn’t really answer the question, does it?” I was unable to keep the edge out of my voice. I had always wondered how I would feel if I ever saw Nathan Morton again. I finally had my answer as the old feelings of anger, betrayal, and hurt hit me like water crashing over the edge of Niagara Falls. I unclenched my hands. “What I’d like to know is why this has gotten the attention of the village mayor so quickly.”

“It is a small village.” He shrugged.

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