

CHAPTER ONE

Luciana Perez, age eight

Lekeitio, Spain, 1922

MOST OF HER FRIENDS DISLIKED the night, but Luciana Perez regularly declared it her favorite time of the day. When the sun touched the ocean's edge and the prettiest color of pink filled the sky, Mamá would put the baby to bed while Papi would tuck Luciana and her younger sisters under their covers. He'd snuggle a chair close by, lean near, and read them stories with the silliest of voices. There simply was nothing better than story hour.

She, Marisol, and little Emilia would each be allowed to pick one book. Luciana always chose *Alice's Adventures Under Ground*, knowing that sometimes her pick would result in more than one tale being told. Papi loved to recount how the book had been written just for their family many, many years ago. No one else even had a copy like theirs. Mr. Carroll had carefully crafted the keepsake for Luciana's great-grandmother. He'd wrapped his words and illustrations inside a deep-green cover held together by a beautiful golden spine. Best of all, Papi would point out on the first page where Mr. Carroll's handwriting inscribed a kind message to help Great-Grandmother remember her daughter who'd died. Papi said this book brought his grandparents happy memories to help lessen the sting of the sad ones.

Luciana supposed that was why she loved stories so much. They always seemed able to make her laugh, even when she felt unhappy. They let her wander to places she'd never actually visited. They made her feel

courageous and curious and adventurous all at once. Sometimes she wished she could live inside the pages. In fact, once she'd spread *Alice's Adventures* out on the floor and tried to jump into it. Papi had arrived right as her dusty toes had landed on the pages, and while he was cross she'd torn the edge of one, he'd smiled and claimed she was as audacious as Alice herself. Luciana didn't know that big word, but she loved the sound of it.

"All right, girls," Papi said as he closed *Pinocchio* and picked up Luciana's choice, "it seems we're to read another of Alice's adventures. Which one would you like to hear tonight?"

Emilia was too little to say anything other than "rabbit," which was all she remembered about the book. Marisol was only a year younger than Luciana, however, and she loved the silly poems inside because Papi would read them in a singsong voice. Luciana would much prefer to hear about the Queen of Hearts herself, but arguing would waste precious time.

"You choose, Papi." Luciana scooted up in bed, excitement thrumming through her.

Papi closed his eyes, opened the book, and placed his finger on a page. Opening his eyes, he looked down. "Tonight, we read about Alice and a cat." Clearing his throat, Papi spoke in the voice he only used for Alice. All too soon he'd finished the chapter.

Marisol and Emilia had fallen asleep, but Luciana was much too awake for Papi to stop reading.

"Please, Papi, one more chapter?" She played with the shiny gold bookmark that fit into the spine. It was one of her favorite secrets, for if one didn't know it was there, they'd never discover it.

Papi took it from her hand, slotted it into place, and closed the book. "I'm afraid not, my child. I have a guest in my study who is waiting for me."

"Please?" She blinked up at him, doing her best to win him over with a pleading look. "You always say patience is important. Can't they be patient?"

Papi chuckled and ran his hand over the top of her head. "He already has been." Papi stood and tugged on her hand. "Come. Let me tuck you into your own bed, where you can tell yourself stories until you fall asleep."

Begrudgingly, she followed him across the room. "My stories are not nearly as wonderful as Mr. Carroll's."

“And why not?” Papi folded back her blankets and motioned for her to climb into her pink sheets.

She shrugged and settled under them.

Papi wrapped her in tight, then leaned down close. “You can tell any story you like, Luciana. Be anyone you want to be. You get to create your life, and it’s only limited by your imagination, so dream big.”

The necklace he wore dangled free from his shirt, and Luciana grasped for the long rectangular charm. Like the bookmark, numbers were engraved into the golden piece. She much preferred the bookmark, but Papi claimed this to be half the key to his heart. The other half, he’d whisper whenever she asked, belonged to her.

Her fingers rubbed the shiny metal. “Then I shall dream of one day living a story as grand as Alice’s.”

“Even grander.” With a tap on her nose, he placed a kiss on her forehead. “Good night, mi joya.”

“Good night, Papi.”

He blew out the lantern, and darkness shrouded the room. She desperately wanted one of the new electric lights Papi had added to many of the rooms downstairs, but he said it would be some time before he added them up here. If she had one, she could try to read another chapter herself. She still stumbled over some words, but more and more she recognized enough of them to enjoy books in a whole new way.

Instead, she lay in bed, looking at the dark ceiling as she spun stories in her mind. It wasn’t the same though.

An idea hit. She rolled over and reached for where Papi had left *Alice’s Adventures Under Ground* on the small table beside her. She stood and tucked the worn book under her arm, then crept across the floor. In the hallway she looked to the nursery, where she could hear Mamá’s whispers to baby Paloma as she rocked her. Turning, Luciana tiptoed to the stairs, avoiding the squeaky step at the bottom.

She stole across the wood floor toward the library, where Papi had recently added one of the new lights beside the cushioned window ledge where she loved to sit. Mamá had even placed a blanket there for rainy days . . . or cool nights like this one. Summer was nearly over, and soon Luciana would have to open the only type of books she didn’t like—schoolbooks.

Her lips scrunched up at the distasteful thought.

As she pressed forward, her glance caught on the door just beyond the library. Papi's study. Not closed all the way, the tiny opening allowed voices to drift through it. Luciana tipped her head, curiosity pulling her closer so she could peek inside.

"My work with Empress Zita is none of your concern, nor should you make it anyone else's."

Luciana perked up at Papi's mention of her new friend's mother. Only days ago, while playing with Adelheid, Luciana had learned that Adelheid's mother had given some of her jewels to Papi. Neither of the girls understood why. Adelheid's mother shouldn't have jewels to give. And Luciana's papi tended grapes in their family vineyard. What would he want with other people's treasures?

She pressed closer to listen for anything that would feed her curiosity or she could tell Adelheid.

Another man, whose back was to Luciana, responded. "It is my concern when you refuse to pay me. This is not what we agreed upon." He sounded similar to when Papi was pretending to be the mean Queen of Hearts. A deep pitch just scary enough to cause Luciana to shiver with a different fear than Papi's villain voice produced.

But then Papi spoke, and the strength and calmness of his tone erased her worry. "It's not, and for that you should be thankful. What you brought me is fake." Papi stood in front of a painting of a white lighthouse standing tall along a beach's edge. He tapped his chin as he studied it. After a moment he turned toward the stranger.

Luciana pressed against the wall so Papi didn't see her.

"A very well-made reproduction of Seurat's work, but a fake nonetheless." His footsteps echoed through the room. "If you would like me to fully uphold my end of our agreement in light of this knowledge, I still can."

"N-No, sir. I'm fine." Suddenly, the stranger sounded like the frightened subjects of the queen. "I'll go."

"Ah yes, I thought you might. However, before you leave, there is something I need you to give me."

"Yes?" The word cracked.

"The name of who made this." When the man didn't answer, Papi continued. "I assure you, if you're wondering who you need to be more concerned with angering, it is me."

Luciana flinched. Of all the voices she'd heard Papi use, she'd never heard that one. Cold and hard, like the jagged cliffs outside.

The man spoke a name Luciana wasn't familiar with, but Papi seemed to be. Then he scurried toward the door. Luciana ducked into the library, her pulse skittering. Of all the stories she would have made up tonight, this wasn't one of them. Papi was her hero, but to the man now rushing out of their home, he seemed to be an enemy. That made no sense, and it made her tummy feel funny. Or perhaps her heart.

Luciana closed her eyes. Papi told her she could make her life anything she could imagine if she just dreamed big enough. She pictured herself with Papi on a sunny day, walking among the grapevines. His laughter. Him reading her a book. Mamá and Luciana's sisters happily playing nearby.

Her puffing chest slowed, and her breathing eased. For the first time ever, she preferred her own story over Papi's, because whomever he'd been in his study had to be a character he played. Not her real papi.

CHAPTER TWO

Present Day

SHE'D BEEN LIED TO.

Absence did not, in fact, make the heart grow fonder. In Natalie Daughtry's experience, it only made it cooler and more detached. At least that was what seemed to be occurring between her and her husband of almost twenty-three years.

Natalie sighed as she slowed for a stop sign. After she'd left two voice-mails on this sunny Friday morning, Mason had finally called while she was on her way to her new job. "It's fine, Mason. There's no sense driving home if you'd simply have to head back there Sunday for another game should you win tonight." Though most of the boys on his high school team and their families planned to make the two-hour return drive from Peoria.

"If gas prices weren't so high . . ."

Natalie's mind drifted while Mason offered his excuses. There'd been a time when he'd been a broke college student who'd scrounge up change to drive three hours to see her. True, their bank account now wasn't plump by any means—thanks to two sons in college and their move back to Kenton Corners, Illinois, which had required giving up her dream career—but they certainly weren't hurting so badly that they couldn't afford a tank of gas.

Seemed what Mason couldn't afford was to spend time with her. Though he had no problem investing oodles of it with his teams. Ironical, since he used to call her his number one teammate.

"Nat?" His frustrated tone said he'd called her name more than once.

“Sorry.” She navigated toward downtown. “Traffic.” Not a complete lie. She’d recently passed a car going the opposite direction. “You were saying?”

“Never mind.” Voices raised behind him. “I have to go. The boys are finishing up in the batting cages.”

As the athletic director at their alma mater, Kenton Corners High School, Mason had originally signed on as football coach and PE teacher. Then this spring he’d agreed to also serve as the baseball coach until the school found a qualified candidate. No doubt if they asked him to take the role permanently, he would add it to his already full plate. Mason was happiest interacting with a sport. Any sport. Especially when his teams were winning, and right now the KCHS Cougars had made it to the quarterfinals of the state playoffs.

“Good luck on the game. Let me know how it goes?”

“Sure. I’ll text you.” He hung up with a simple goodbye. No *I love you* or any term of endearment. Not that she’d offered one either, but she’d long ago become tired of saying the words first, only to hear him mindlessly repeat them.

Reaching the Golden Key, the small downtown bookshop, Natalie steered into one of the diagonal parking spots. When she’d left her job as head librarian at the Cincinnati Public Library in Ohio so Mason could become the athletic director here, she’d taken a part-time position with the Kenton Corners library system. While it felt like a demotion in both skill and pay, at least she’d still been able to work with books. Unfortunately, at the first of the year, budget cuts had forced KCL to consolidate with a nearby county, and since she was the newest hire, she’d been the first fired.

Or “let go due to budget constraints,” as they’d so kindly put it.

As such, she’d been on the lookout for another job this past March when she’d received a mysterious note from someone named Caspar, beckoning her to Halstead Manor. He’d invited two other women as well—Everleigh Wheaton and Brooke Sumner. Accepting his summons had led to extra income which had gone toward her sons’ bills at Purdue and Cornell. More importantly, his unexpected job offer had brought new friendships and an intriguing distraction at a time when she greatly needed both.

Mason spent more hours with his students than with her, and Reed

and Hunter had decided not to come home for summer after all. She couldn't blame them. Their once lively home now echoed with memories rather than the sounds of new ones being made. She didn't want to be there either, and obviously neither did Mason.

Which begged the question—why were they continuing to play this charade of marriage? Their boys were grown, so it certainly wasn't for their benefit.

She met her eyes in the rearview mirror, the answer staring back at her. The only thing holding her to Mason was the commitment she'd made before God on that fall day years ago when they'd both been young and in love. Their youth had evaporated right along with their love, but their vow remained. It was the one constant she couldn't navigate around.

Though lately she questioned if God really intended for her to stay in a marriage that was a pitiful representation of him. After all, marriage was meant to show a picture of God's love for his people. They certainly weren't bringing him any glory with their union. It felt as if God's heart was breaking right along with hers.

Movement from inside the Golden Key dragged Natalie's attention to its entrance. Behind the evergreen-colored door with a large window, owner Harry White waved. Natalie smothered the smile that always wanted to lift at her boss's appearance. His bushy white hair rarely saw a comb, but the wayward strands balanced his dimpled cheeks and rounded chin. His shockingly green eyes always held a sparkle, and his lips rarely frowned. But his physical appearance stood in stark contrast to his attire. Harry White loved bow ties and plaid suits. Today he wore one the color of chives, with hues of pink forming wide, intersecting lines. His bow tie matched the pink, as did the silk scarf in his breast pocket. The contrast between his unkempt hair and impeccable suit created a visual portrayal of Harry's personality to a T. Simply put, Harry White was a charming dichotomy of a man.

A little of the gloomy weight that seemed to follow her lately lifted. Working here around Harry and books paired perfectly with her other position with Caspar. In their own ways, both jobs reawakened the adventurous spirit inside her that Mason had once stoked but motherhood had quieted. The moment she'd held Hunter in her arms, she'd feared leaving him an orphan. That feeling intensified when Reed came along.

During those years, reading had provided the chance to still explore, but in a safe way. Her love of story had led to a fulfilling career as a librarian while also allowing her to flourish in her role as wife and mom.

And flourish she had. She'd poured her all into ensuring Mason and the boys reached their goals, because she adored her family. The story they'd been writing together was her favorite of all time, and they'd now reached the point where Reed and Hunter had begun their own narratives. It was hard, but her mama's heart knew this day would—and should—come with her boys. But she hadn't expected Mason to do the same.

All the changes in this past year highlighted her encroaching loneliness. Making new friends as a girl was hard. Making new friends in her forties? Practically impossible, especially with her boys grown. Children came with built-in friendship opportunities in the form of other mothers. That was why when Caspar's invitation had arrived, along with two new female acquaintances, Natalie had jumped on it.

Unfortunately, work with Caspar still left spaces in her days. Case in point, he'd mentioned another assignment but had yet to fill her, Everleigh, and Brooke in on any details. Rather than waiting in her quiet house, Natalie had accepted the job with Harry. Today would involve her first hours working solo after being trained by him yesterday. Speaking of, he remained at the entrance, watching her.

Opening her car door, she exited into a wall of heat wafting up from the asphalt. Summer had arrived early and in full force this year. Most people thought the Midwest dodged the season's intense temperature, but she'd endured plenty of scorchers growing up here.

"Come in, come in." Harry stood with the door wide open to greet her. "Before that dastardly heat melts you."

"It is sweltering out there." Natalie strode past him into the air-conditioned store. She inhaled the scent that only books produced, the smell as familiar and comfortable as the jeans she wore. Layered underneath the lovely aroma floated notes of lavender and mint from the diffuser Harry constantly ran at the counter. "How's your morning been?"

"Oh fine, fine." As he spoke, he scurried past the oversized chairs planted near the windows. A bright fabric embroidered with books and mugs in a myriad of blues, greens, and purples covered the chairs. What

most would consider garish somehow worked in this space. Harry paused beside the front counter. "And yours?"

"Fine as well." Minus Mason's phone call. "Better now that I'm here. This place carries a contagious joy, and you are a huge part of that."

Harry purposefully stocked titles that always ended in hope, while also doling out that emotion along with kindness to every person who walked through his door.

His cheeks reddened and lifted as he smiled. "Sarah often said she'd caught the joy bug working here."

His last employee had recently married and moved to Nashville. She and Harry had shared a special friendship, and Natalie could tell he missed her. "Have you heard from her?"

"She rang me this morning. Sounded jovial, like a newlywed should." A faraway look filled his eyes. "It's a peculiar thing to have lived here long enough to watch not only your own children but others—like yourself—grow up, get married, and move away. Though you've since returned." He slapped his thigh. "And you're not here to listen to me bemoan the passing of time. Come, come. There's a project in the back." He waved her to follow him.

She did, and they ducked into the stock room that also functioned as their break room. The cozy, welcoming feel of the bookstore extended to this area. Extra titles lined shelves. An armoire provided space to hang her purse. A round table took up one corner with comfy chairs to sit and eat. Thick rugs warmed the concrete floor, and a desk with a lamp and computer invited her to research.

A stack of four old books perched on the corner of the desk. Natalie approached them. "You went to another estate sale."

Since returning home, she'd reestablished her regular visits here, and she and Harry had developed a friendship of sorts. She knew one of his favorite pastimes included shopping estate sales for treasured stories, a hobby he seemed especially talented in. They'd bonded further over their love of antique books. He'd shown her his collection and pointed out a few titles he'd purchased years prior from an estate sale at Halstead Manor. That had brought up her own connection with the house, and Natalie had inquired if he recognized the name Caspar, but much to her dismay, it was unfamiliar to him.

"Indubitably, Natalie. How absolutely astute of you to notice, though

I'm not surprised. Not surprised at all." Harry lifted the top book. The cover was a deep navy blue with a gold-embossed little boy and bear, and Harry presented the offering to Natalie. "It's signed. I believe it to be real, though I wanted your opinion."

Her nerves hummed as she carefully cracked open the cover. A map of the Hundred Acre Wood greeted her, and she studied it before turning the page. She made note of the publisher and copyright—E. P. Dutton & Company, 1926—before flipping to the title page to find A. A. Milne's signature. Natalie had once immersed herself in Milne's work and familiarized herself with his signature—she'd been tasked with authenticating several of his books for a museum exhibition in Cincinnati. All those details remained clear in her mind.

In all honesty, retaining information posed no difficulty for her, and his wasn't the only author's handwriting she'd familiarized herself with. Coming in contact with collectible books as often as she did in both her work and hobby worlds, learning to spot forgeries proved a valuable talent. Harry certainly seemed to agree.

Natalie traced her finger over the small illustration of Pooh Bear alongside Milne's autograph. "Remember, you can always text me a picture when you're at a sale. While I might not be able to provide a definitive answer from a photo, there are times I can absolutely conclude what you're looking at is fake." She closed the book and handed it to him. "This signature, however, is very real."

"Fantastically good news." Harry clutched the book to his chest. "Though I'm quite certain even if it weren't veritable, I would have purchased this lovely anyway. Books should never face the fate of spending the rest of their days in a box." He shook his head. "All that wonder, lost. No, I simply could not abide it."

"I understand." She loved words and stories as much as he did. "But you do need to be careful you're not taken advantage of."

He leaned close, as if sharing one of his life's secrets. "As long as the story remains unchanged and able to be shared, then naught is lost." He straightened. "You can see this wasn't my only acquisition yesterday. I believe allowing these books their time in the sun is only fair, as they've been sequestered far too long. Thus, today's project entails our front window. Are you up for the challenge?"

"I am." She peered at the other three titles on the desk, then to those remaining in the box beside it. "Though some might benefit from being in the display case inside rather than exposed to sunlight."

"I am quite sure you'll know which to place where. Quite sure." He reached for his worn leather bag, which accompanied him everywhere, should he meet a book in need of rescue. "I'm off to the bank and then lunch with Winnie." His sister, and no doubt part of the impetus for his love of Winnie-the-Pooh collectibles. "If you need me for anything, I'm only a block away."

"I'm sure I'll be fine." She highly doubted there was a book here she wasn't at least somewhat familiar with, and learning his point-of-sale system had been a breeze. Harry maintained an old-fashioned gold cash register with heavy round buttons, which added to the charm of this store. He also, however, had a tablet for anyone who wished to pay with their phone. "Take all the time you need."

"Time, yes . . . that reminds me." He rested a hand on his belly. "Have you heard from your Caspar when you might be needed again?"

During her interview, she'd informed Harry that her other job often required strange hours. Sometimes even last-minute trips. He hadn't seemed to mind, but he would need to know her availability before making any of his own plans. Especially as she was his only employee.

"Not yet, though I believe he'll be in touch soon." At least she hoped. Not only for Harry's sake, but she'd feel much more settled herself when Caspar finally called. She hated wondering if he'd forgotten about them or simply moved on. That the job he'd offered and the friendships it had brought could already be fading. This season marked by leaving was unsettling. She wasn't ready for one more thing to walk out of her life, even something so new. "I'll let you know the moment I'm aware of any conflicts so you can plan accordingly."

"Good, good." Harry's familiar repetition snapped her back to the moment. "Simply keep me aware. I'm as flexible as Tigger is bouncy. I don't care which hours I work—just that I don't work them all."

Bidding her adieu, Harry slipped out the exit that led into a small alleyway. Natalie worked to haul his finds from yesterday to the front counter. There, she could leisurely sort through the titles, catalog them into the computer system, and contemplate a creative way to display them

in the window. One of the charming things about Harry's store was how he mixed old books in with the new ones.

As she settled near the register, the bell over the door dinged and a young mom pushed a stroller inside. A baby reclined against a blue plaid blanket, and a toddler with blond pigtails held on to the mom's shirt.

"Morning," Natalie greeted.

The mom lifted tired eyes to Natalie and bestowed an exhausted smile on her. "Good morning. We're here to look at the Gerald and Piggie books. If you have them?"

"We most definitely do, along with the Pigeon books. Have you read those?" At the shaking of their heads, Natalie waved them along. "If you love Gerald and Piggie, you'll love their friend the Pigeon."

Pointing out the comfy reading nooks along the way, Natalie escorted them to the children's section. After showing off the large selection of titles Harry kept on hand, Natalie stepped back so they could explore. The mom knelt to help her daughter find old favorites, along with new tales, while also rocking her son in the stroller.

Natalie smiled, remembering those days of entertaining a toddler and simultaneously protecting the slumber of the baby. Moments when both children were in their happy place and peaceful felt, at times, as rare and fleeting as a shooting star. If only someone had told her how those years would fade away faster than that star flying through the sky.

No one had prepared her for this season. There'd been bridal showers and baby showers and crazy amounts of advice on how to navigate the toddler to teen years, but people had been conspicuously quiet on what to do once you raised your children and your marriage sputtered into complacency. So here Natalie sat, seeking to fill the spaces she hadn't known were being carved out.

The toddler giggled as her mom expertly voiced Gerald and Piggie and their silly antics. Natalie ducked away to return to the task awaiting her. A short time later, the mom purchased three new books—one of which featured their new friend Pigeon.

Natalie worked straight to lunchtime, happily pointing out new authors right along with old classics to customers who meandered in and out on this sunny day. There was something wonderful about pairing a person with the perfect read. Typically, with a well-placed question or two,

Natalie discovered where to direct them. Sending people on their next adventure, helping them find an encouraging word, or even deepening their knowledge on a subject was a joy she didn't take lightly. Quite simply, there wasn't much that submersing oneself into a new book couldn't cure.

Her stomach growling, she nabbed her salad from the refrigerator in back and set it at the counter. Now to find her own next title. Harry kindly allowed her to treat the store as a library. He proclaimed it was one of the perks of working here, and she gladly partook in it. She'd already devoured the recent releases from her favorite authors, which meant today she was on the hunt for her own new friend.

Her arms were full of possibilities when the bell over the door jingled yet again. She peeked around the romance section to see a tall, thirty-something man with olive skin, black hair, and dark eyes enter. He looked like someone who frequented gyms more than bookstores, but who was she to judge her fellow bibliophiles?

Natalie set her books down and greeted him. "Good afternoon. Can I help you find a book?"

He looked up from the thriller that had caught his eye. "Just browsing." He tilted his head as he studied her. "Have we met?"

"No. Not that I know of." She was good with faces, even better with names. Mason always relied on her to supply them because they frequently slipped his mind. This stranger wasn't anyone she recalled having met.

His perusal of her intensified. "I'm sure I've seen you someplace." Then he snapped his fingers. "Halstead Manor, right? You've been out there?" He must have noted her confusion, as he added, "I was recently there with a crew doing some work for . . . John, I think his name was?"

There'd been some men leaving as she'd arrived the other day. They'd been fixing siding on the house, but she'd been so focused on what had been happening with Everleigh that she hadn't given them much notice.

"Yes, right." She held out her hand. "I'm Natalie."

"Matt." He clasped her hand. "That's a pretty interesting place. Does it belong to your family?"

"My boss, actually."

He looked around the space. "This owner owns the manor too?"

She shook her head. "Nope. Different boss."

"Oh." He nodded before holding up the book he'd been checking out. "Happen to have any other titles by this author? I love her signature twists and turns."

Natalie was familiar with the author of suspense. "Sure. Follow me."

They chatted while he chose a book, then they made their way to the front counter. While she'd been assisting him, Harry had returned from his lunch. He checked the register and now waited patiently as she rung up Matt's purchases.

As the door closed on Matt's exit, Harry turned her way. "Stupendous, Natalie! Your first morning alone, and you've made several sales. Nicely done. Nicely done."

She often wondered if Harry even realized he regularly repeated himself. Everyone—including her—found his quirkiness charming. "I'd like to take all the credit, but it's more of a testament to how you've made this a place people love to frequent. Though I'm not sure what draws them more. You . . . or the books."

"Oh, poppycock." He tugged on the corners of his bow tie as if straightening it, though it remained forever cockeyed. "I am nowhere near as interesting as any of the books here."

"Tell that to your customers. Nearly every single one asked about you or told me to pass on a hello." She nodded to the window, where Matt could be seen sliding into his car. "He was the only person who actually knew me. Strangely enough, I had no clue who he was."

"Hmm." Harry squinted toward the front window at the man's retreating back. "I didn't recognize him either."

Unusual. Harry knew practically everyone in town. "He said he'd seen me out at Halstead Manor, so I wonder if he's a part of Stew's Crew. They've been working there recently." That was who John had used, based on the van in the driveway that day.

Harry shook his head, causing his white hair to stick out farther. "I'm acquainted with all of Stew's boys, and he's not one of them."

"Maybe he's new?"

Again, he shook his head. "I had them out the other day to fix the awning over my door, and that man was not with them. I'm good with faces. I'd have remembered."

Natalie stared at the door Matt had exited through, her curiosity piqued. The only people she'd bumped into out at Halstead Manor, besides her new friends, had been that work crew. If Matt wasn't one of them, how did he know her and her connection to the manor?