

Chapter One

Present Day, Bakersfield, Vermont

Isabel Joven

The doorbell pealed, a tumbling chime of notes that finished several long minutes before I opened the heavy old door. A small box lay on the mat, covered in brown paper. It was addressed to me in beautiful cursive. There was no return address. I looked up to wave at the delivery driver, to thank him for his trip up the treacherous drive, but his truck was already gone.

Cold air tangled in my hair and twined around my ankles. Shadows of the leaves overhead danced across the surface of the package. The box was about twelve inches long and half as wide. I turned it over in my hands, but there were no other markings on it. I went back inside and closed the door before Sampson escaped.

I carried the box to the kitchen counter. The wide pine boards were warm under my bare feet and sunlight fell in slanted beams across the old room. With scissors, I cut away the paper and then slit the tape that held the cardboard box closed. The paper fell away. Inside the box lay a note, in the same beautiful cursive, on top of a mound of packing peanuts.

“To Isabel.”

Odd.

I didn't recognize the handwriting and there was no other information on the creamy note card, not even on the back indicating where it had come from. I rummaged through the white peanuts and pulled the packing paper away. Beneath it lay a small bundle, about ten inches long. The plastic bubbles were soft against my fingers, but whatever was underneath was dense. With a final flourish, the bubble wrap revealed a small, gray-looking doll. An antique, she had to be. Her face and hands were porcelain—or maybe china—and webbed with capillary-type cracks. The body was soft cloth; a peek under her skirt told me. Her eyes were blue, or had once been and had since faded to a sort of stormy gray. The whites were also tinged yellowish and her hair was the color of dishwater. Her dress was an old calico print, simple with no embroidery or beading. She wasn't beautiful in the traditional sense, but something about her spoke to me. When I reached a finger into the paper she was nestled in and ran it along the side of her face, something shifted inside of me. A sort of shiver of happiness.

But where had she come from? I set the doll to the side and dumped out the rest of the packing peanuts, even ran my hands along all the interior flaps of the box, but there was nothing else. No other note, no tags that had fallen off, no other explanation.

I carried her into my studio, her body stiff and heavy in my hands. I'd been here at the high worktable before the doorbell had interrupted. Lots of big windows let in daylight, not only along the wall, but also from the skylights tucked in the high ceiling above. Here, I created art dolls that were sold around the country and the world. The right light was essential to my work. In the studio, the doll looked smaller, more diminutive somehow, but more ethereal, too. I placed her on the worktable next to me.

“Where did you come from?” I asked her. But she only looked back at me blankly. A bank of clouds passed over the sun, and all the golden light faded then. I shivered and glanced out the

window. Dry leaves blew together in an unseen breeze and branches overhead shook. I left the doll where she lay and went to find slippers and a sweater. I was curious about the gift, but I was also on a deadline. The work for the upcoming exhibit was non-negotiable. Many professional artists spent their whole lives dreaming of a solo exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I couldn't let anything distract me, with my own solo show only weeks away.

The dolls I made from clay, wood, and fabric lined the shelves in the studio. Most of these were under eighteen inches in height, made from a variety of materials. A journalist had once referred to my dolls as "eerily fantastical," and I think it was the best description they'd ever received. They were more sculpture than doll, and many were based on folklore and literature from hundreds of years ago. There were dolls depicting the saints and sinners in Dante's *Inferno*, while others memorialized characters in tragic English literature, like Kafka's Grete Samsa in *The Metamorphosis*. Some were just creatures or characters that came to me in dreams, or poked at my subconscious while I wandered in the woods on one of my daily walks. I never lacked ideas, only hours in which to produce all the dolls that lived in my head. The dolls in the studio were creations that were between shows or awaiting collectors. In the art world, there are few things more exhilarating than finding a patron of your work.

On the table before me lay a large block of clay wrapped in plastic and a Mason jar packed with carving tools. The wall above the worktable was a kaleidoscope of color, texture, and inspiration. Packed with scraps of fabric, sketches of dark, shadowy creatures, gothic-inspired memorabilia, and bits of fern, bark, and other minutia collected on my walks, the bulletin board was like a projector view of my mind. Interspersed with this melee were framed copies of certifications and awards I'd won over the years. "Isabel Joven, National Institute of American Doll Artists, Master Instructor," and "Gold Winner for the 2015 Professional Doll Makers Art Guild," along with others dotted the wall.

I had just started to form the basics of the face—the nose, the brow, and the chin—when the phone rang. The trill was jolting in the quiet and I nearly jumped. I'd let the answering machine get it. But then, it could be my agent, Helen.

I crossed the studio in three steps and grabbed the cordless phone from the small table near the doorway.

"Hello?"

"It's me," my brother said, not bothering with a greeting. He never did.

"Oh, hey," I said, and pinched the bridge of my nose. "I just have a minute. I'm in the studio—"

"Yeah, that's fine." He sounded distracted. "I'll get right to the point. Look, Isa, I know that you have your heart set on staying at the house. But I've been in touch with a realtor in St. Albans and he thinks that now is a great time to put it on the market. In fact, he has a family moving from out of state and they're interested in something just like the farmhouse. Isn't that great? They want land and something with history." He cleared his throat. "I have his number. You can call—"

"No," I said, surprised at just how forceful my voice was. "I'm not calling a realtor. And I'm not moving. Nigel, we've had this conversation a dozen times, and every time it's like it doesn't sink in. I'm. Not. Moving. Please, just stop. This is my home—"

“It was our home, Isa. Do you really think that Mom and Dad wanted this for you? Living out in the boondocks on your own, like a hermit? When’s the last time you went to town? Had any contact with another human being?” He stopped for a moment. I could nearly hear him telling himself to breathe.

“Look,” he said finally, his voice quieter. “It wouldn’t hurt to just call the realtor. Let him take a look at the place. I’m going to be up that way again in a week or so. The attorney’s got a little more paperwork for me to sign. If it’s something you want to proceed with—”

I started to tell him it wasn’t, but he plowed on, made his voice a little louder. “If it’s something that you want to proceed with, then we’ll meet with him while I’m there. Just think about it, okay?”

I grunted in response, the hand that pinched the bridge of my nose sliding down to cover my face. “Fine,” I said, moving my hand away. “I’ll call him. But I’m not moving, so this is just going to be a waste of his time.”

“Sounds good,” Nigel said, ignoring the part of the conversation he didn’t like. “Let me give you his name and number.”

I pulled a felt-tip pen from my pocket and wrote the information down on my hand.

For several long minutes after I hung up, I stood at the worktable. First, I felt anger—hot and raw—in my chest. How dare he pull this with me? But that morphed into something more familiar. Fear. The fact was that Nigel was the executor of our parents’ will. And while my original intent had been to use my half of the inheritance to keep the house, medical bills and estate fees had eaten up most of what we’d been left with. Nigel saw selling the house as the opportunity to get something—anything—from my parents’ estate. Whereas I saw the farmhouse as home, he saw it only as a financial burden. But it was the only place I’d truly ever felt safe.

I shook myself mentally. I had to focus right now on the show. Maybe it would be the turning point in my career that I’d been waiting such a long time for. Feeling eyes on me, I turned. I expected to see the lumbering, feline frame of Sampson, but nothing was there. Goose bumps popped up on my arms and I pulled my sweater tighter.

As I moved to extract a carving tool from the big Mason jar on the shelf at the back of the worktable, I saw the antique doll. Her gray eyes studied me, her mouth a dull, pink smile. I reached up and ran a hand over her dress, smoothing it down. Feeling more peaceful and centered, I went to work on the ball of clay in front of me.

Chapter Two

1944, Winooski Vermont

Claudette “Etta” Hayes

I stood on the train platform, my heartbeat tap dancing in my wrists. The big clock above said that the train was a minute behind schedule. *Please, please hurry.* A thin line of sweat dampened my forehead where hat met skin. He was almost here. I’d tried counting it out while

lying in bed last night—how many days Will had been gone—but sleep had pulled me under before I'd finished. It felt like a million; like an eternity.

I peered down the track again, and then stepped back. It wasn't ladylike, my mother's voice reminded me in my mind. There was a crowd on the platform—men and women, a few children darting in and out like honeybees. Thinking of my mother reminded me of Will's, who'd died during childbirth. Even though my four younger siblings were too much sometimes—too much chaos and noise, too much work—I couldn't imagine growing up like Will.

"Wasn't it lonely?" I'd asked him once, when we were enjoying a picnic near the river. "Didn't you miss having brothers and sisters?"

He'd laughed, chucking me under the chin. "You can't miss what you don't know, Etta."

"I think I want two children," I'd said without thinking, then blushed.

"Two is a good number," Will had said. "A boy and a girl, maybe? Or two girls, as pretty as you."

The train whistled now, and I jumped, startled.

"Here it comes," a man further down the platform shouted.

Time slowed then and everything around me—the smell of fresh loaves of bread from the nearby bakery, the coolness of the air, the warmth of the sun on my cheeks—fell away. Will had come home.

"Two years, four months, and twenty-two days," I said, sitting across from him at the table of the cozy Italian restaurant.

"What's that?" Will asked, squeezing my fingers. He sipped the last of the red wine in his glass, and his dark eyes shone in the candlelight.

"That's how long you've been away. It feels like a lifetime."

"Heck, that is a long time, isn't it?" He drained the last of the wine and refilled his glass, then tipped the bottle toward mine. I shook my head and covered it. Already my head felt slightly thick and fuzzy.

"It's strange," Will said. "A lifetime, but in some ways, it feels like everything that happened over there was just a bad dream. Like you feel when you come out of a picture show, you know? And you can't quite get your head back into the real world." He looked around the room.

"Was it awful?" I knew I shouldn't pry, but my curiosity was greater than any sense of decorum.

"Yeah," he said, looking back at me. "Yeah, it was."

I waited for him to say more, but he didn't. He just squeezed my fingers again and took out a packet of cigarettes. He offered me one first, which I accepted. We sat at the table drinking each other in between the light haze of smoke that swirled. He looked so much the same, yet in some ways so much different. There were lines around his eyes that hadn't been there before. And then, of course, there was his leg. . . . The cane rested on the corner of the table, an unspoken reminder that no matter how hard we tried, nothing would ever really be quite the same again.

After dinner, we walked around the city at a slowed pace. Will's right leg gave him a somewhat jerky gait, his cane tapping with every step. My arm was linked through his though, and we talked not about the time he was away, but the time ahead.

"Let's get married in the autumn," he said abruptly, stopping under a blossoming tree on the corner. The petals were lit from behind by the moonlight and the tree appeared to be glowing around its edges. "Once I've had a chance to find work...get myself established. You'll need time to make your dress and invite your family. I don't have many to invite." We started walking again.

I nodded and snuggled closer to his arm, my chest filled with warm light. I was surprised that I wasn't glowing like the streetlamps above.

"I've been saving money from the mill," I said. "And I'd like to keep working. Just till the children come along."

Will stopped abruptly. I glanced over, surprised to see his eyebrows pulled down tightly in a frown.

"We've talked about this before and I haven't changed my mind. I can provide for my family, the same as your father provided for yours."

I sighed, the little bubble of happiness leaking just a bit.

"I know how you feel about it. But work—even though it's not glamorous—makes me feel like I have a purpose, you know? Besides, like you said, it will just be until you get established. Not forever." I tugged on his arm and he reluctantly started walking again. True, my job was dirty and monotonous, but it was satisfying to get my paycheck every week. I felt industrious and useful. And it was nice to have Lily, the closest friend I'd ever had, to commiserate with. Once I was a housewife and mother, would I lose her friendship? I pushed the thought away.

"Once we've enjoyed married life for a while"—I pinched his arm and batted my eyes at him with a wide smile. He smiled back slowly in response—"and decide to start our little family, I'll have all I can do to wait on you and roll myself around with my big, pregnant belly." I laughed, but Will didn't join me.

"It'll all work out," I said. "You'll see." But inside, I felt a little tendril of dread. Would Mama be all right without another set of hands? And what about the half of my paycheck that I gave her now? She'd told me over and over again that I should keep all the money, but of course, I couldn't. Perhaps if Will's father was less of a miser...but what was the good of wishing that?

"No son of mine is going to squander what I've worked so hard to build," Will had said once in an uncanny impersonation. "You've got to make your own way in this world, kid."

"Small wonder some lucky woman hasn't snatched him up," I'd joked, but Will's face had gone dark. Though he was a joker, and some would say a dreamer, there was a darkness to Will, too. We all had our dark sides though, didn't we? Once we were married and had our own place, Will wouldn't have to deal with his father so much, anyway.

"I wish I had more," he said. "The Army wants you to sacrifice your life and pays you fifty dollars a month to do it." The frown was back.

I squeezed his arm and smiled at him.

"I don't care about the money," I said. "Better to be poor and happy than wealthy and miserable. Besides, we don't need a big place to start. I'll be happy to have more than one room and, most of all, that we're together."

“I know,” he said. “I just want to prove to my old man that he’s not the only one who can be a success. Show the old bastard that I’ve got a mind for business, too. I’ve got so many ideas, you know? There are so many possibilities out there. I just wish...” He sighed and ran a hand through his hair, then tugged on it. Thinking about his father seemed to open some hole inside of him, and sucked out everything else.

“I’m sorry, Etta. I’m spoiling the night, aren’t I? Forget about my father. And forget everything else. In fact, that’s enough talking, don’t you think, Miss Hayes?” Will asked and pulled me under a large oak tree with drooping branches. His breath was warm on my face, and then my neck, his lips caressing softly.

“Oh, Will,” I said, when our lips finally broke apart. “I’ve missed you so much.”

Later, we lay under blankets in the back of his rusted Chevy. Lily would laugh at the speed of our “knowing” each other. I turned and propped myself on an elbow. Will was looking out the window at the bright pinpricks of stars in the sky. He turned and exhaled loudly. His face had looked dark and shadowed, but when he looked at me, the shadows were gone. He was his same self again, handsome and sweet.

“Etta,” he said, a smile turning up one corner of his mouth.

I smiled back.

“I have something for you.”

“You do?” I asked. I tried to keep my voice neutral. There was no money for a ring right now. I’d told him over and over that it didn’t matter, that we should continue to save the money we were making for the future. We would want a house for the kids. To have a real lawn to mow, and space to hold backyard barbecues with the neighbors, wouldn’t we? A ring was a luxury—unnecessary. So then why did my heart hammer so hard in my chest? Why had my fingers begun to shake?

I sat up, pulled my dress quickly back over my head, and smoothed the skirt. He eyed me, his lips twisting into that half smile that made my stomach drop. He tossed both of our cigarettes out of the window, and left it cracked so that more of the fresh night air washed into the car. I breathed deeply.

“Hold out your hands and close your eyes,” Will said. I heard him rummaging around in the front. There was a rustling of paper, then a grunt as he strained to reach something. He swore softly under his breath, then settled back beside me. I couldn’t keep the smile from my lips. My hands were cupped, prepared for the small box that would nestle perfectly there. Perhaps his father had come around, after all, giving him the ring that had been his mother’s. A fluttering hope tickled my belly. But instead, I felt the outline of a larger package—heavy, with scratchy paper.

“All right,” Will said. “Open your eyes.”

I opened them. A rectangular box, wrapped in brown paper and tied with red and white string sat in my hands. A cold wash of disappointment drenched me, but I smiled brightly.

“Should I open it now?”

“Sure,” Will said. “Just know something before you do. This gift is special, Etta.” His face was serious. “Go ahead,” he said, “open it.”

Carefully, I slipped the string from the box and removed the paper. The box inside was familiar, and as I looked more closely in the moonlight, I saw that it was a cracker box. I glanced at Will.

“It gets better,” he said with a chuckle.

I opened the box. Will had cut down the length of one side, so that it opened like a small treasure chest or coffin. I cracked open the lid and stared. Inside was a doll—a blonde-haired, china-or-porcelain doll, about ten inches tall. She wore a simple, calico dress and her face, pale in the moonlight, smiled up at me. Her mouth was a sly bow and her eyes were blue. Something about her face was foxlike. She was strangely heavy for her small size, and her body was soft in my hands.

I smiled and tried to hide the disappointment that had crept its way up the back of my throat.

“Thank you,” I said, and smoothed a hand over the dress. “She’s lovely.”

“She’s more than that,” Will said, and I glanced at him. He watched me, dark shadows hiding his eyes.

“She is?” I asked. “Why?”

“Trust me,” Will said. “This doll is going to be an important part of our future.”

I smiled and hoped it looked authentic. “Where did she come from?”

“I brought her back with me from overseas. I thought of you when I saw her. And about the little Etta we’ll have someday.”

I nodded, but didn’t trust myself to speak without crying. Why had he given me this? Even as a child, I’d never been fond of dolls. Their staring, dead eyes. Their frozen faces and stiff hands. My head had started to pound. The wine we’d sipped earlier had made my stomach sour.

“I want you to promise me that you’ll keep her safe, Etta.”

I glanced up at him, surprised by the tone in his voice.

“Of course,” I said, and patted the doll in what I hoped looked like a nurturing manner. “Of course I will.”

“Good.” Will smiled that crooked half-smile again and ran a finger down my neck and over my collarbone. My heartbeat quickened, and my breath caught in my chest.

“Thank you,” I said, and placed a hand on his cheek. “She’s beautiful.”