

CHAPTER ONE

THE TRUTH CAN BE TRICKY. IN ALL MY TWELVE years I've never lied. Well, actually I won't be twelve until next month. Okay, to be honest, I sometimes exaggerate a little, and maybe I'll hold back a few details, but that's because I keep getting in trouble for telling the whole truth. Mom says I think with my mouth. Like, last week, Evvie and I rode our bikes to Melissa's sleepover, and when we got there, all sweaty, Evvie said, "Yeeks, I must smell like a pig," and I said, "Pigs don't sweat. You smell like a goat." It was the truth, but she didn't speak to me all night.

Speaking of speaking, my annoying brother, Brian, who's nine, hangs on to words like they're shiny quarters, too valuable to spend, especially now that our lives have been turned upside down. I stomp around and yell, but he just holds it all in. That can't be good, can it? If I stuck him with a pin, he'd pop like a balloon.

Right now Mom and I are cleaning the living room, or more like she's cleaning and I'm batting around a feather duster. "It makes me mad that I can't get Brian talking when there's so much to say about Dad and all that stuff."

"Give him time, Shelby," Mom says, turning off the vacuum.

"*Mom!*" She'd never admit it, but Brian is her favorite. She always makes excuses for him. "Would it kill him to say what's on his mind?" I demand.

Mom sighs. She's out of the crying phase of their divorce and into the deep-sighing phase now. "Yes, Shelby, it would kill him. Not literally, but there's a lot in his heart, and it's too painful for him to talk about it."

"He'd feel better if he got it out. It's the healthy thing to do." I'm practically barking at my poor mom, but I can't stop.

"That's the difference between the two of you, honey. You get white-hot mad, and he freezes. You're so much like your father," she says under her breath as Brian comes into the living room. She hands him a dustrag and a can of Pledge.

"This?" He points to the coffee table.

See what I mean? He could have said, “Okay, I guess you want me to dust this table. I’d be glad to, Mom.” But he says it all in one word and a question mark.

“Yes, and we want to finish up quickly to get to the hospital. Aunt Amelia’s expecting us,” Mom says.

“Ugh. We just saw her Thursday,” I mutter, and now we have to spend a perfectly beautiful August afternoon at St. Catherine’s Hospital with creaky old Aunt Amelia. Did anyone ask me what I wanted to do this afternoon? Of course not. Does anyone ever? “You don’t want to go, do you, Brian?”

“Nope.”

Wrapping the cord around the vacuum, Mom promises, “It’ll just be a short visit. She loves seeing you kids.”

Brian pulls at the fringe on his cutoff shorts and says, “Seems like she’s already dead.”

“Mom, did you hear that? A whole sentence!” Well, this calls for a celebration. Like a crazed bird, I chirp, “Come on, Brian, let’s go outside and pick some flowers to take to Aunt Amelia.”

He shrugs and follows me out to the yard, where I pick a bunch of daisies.

“Mad at the flowers?” Brian asks.

“No, why are you asking me that?”

He demonstrates a ferocious yank, like rescuing a drowning swimmer.

He's right — it's not the flowers' fault. And he's right about old Aunt Amelia, too. There's something creepy about her. For one thing, she never smiles. Maybe it's because her false teeth might fall out. She's older than the earth's crust, at least eighty-six. She's not actually my aunt, she's Mom's, because she's Gram's older sister. But she's a sourpuss and not at all like my sweet grandma, who passed away when I was nine. How come the sour ones live longer, just the way pickles last forever, but sweet cucumbers turn mushy in the veggie bin?

Dad doesn't like her much, either, but he used to say, "Be patient with the old girl, Shel. She's got one foot in the grave."

I wonder when the other foot will follow.



Aunt Amelia's hospital room is hot enough to boil lobsters. She's shrunk to the size of a withered old child, and the hospital bed looks hugely white around her. Mom plants a kiss on her walnut face, but I'm not about to do

that, because she smells like vitamins, which I hate, especially the big ones that get stuck going down.

“Hand me my glasses, Shelby Constance,” she says in her raspy old voice, “so I can better see your face.” As if she could see much at all. Her eyes are dim and cloudy. Mom says she’s afraid to have cataract surgery.

I ease the glasses onto her nose, and one spidery hand comes out of the covers to straighten them. “Ah, yes. Don’t let that frown freeze on your face,” she warns. “Where’s the boy?”

Mom hustles Brian to the bedside. He smiles and hands over the daisies when Mom pokes his side.

“Daisies. Hmph. Smell like feet, if you ask me. Stick that bunch in my water pitcher.” She squints to give Brian a good look. “Not very tall, are you?”

“He’s only nine,” I remind her, because Brian’s sensitive about his size, which is just right . . . for a seven-year-old.

“Now listen here,” Aunt Amelia says, and we all huddle close as though she’s about to make a big announcement, which she does. “I’m not going to be around much longer. . . .”

Mom hushes her.

“Be sensible, Serena. My show’s had a long run, but the curtain is about to drop with a quiet thud.”

Brian flashes me a *What’s she saying?* look, and I shrug *Who knows?*

“It’s about the house at Cinder Creek.”

She means that ugly old rambling monstrosity in front of her little cottage. We’ve never actually been in it, but just passing it is chilling enough, because every window looks painted shut, and inside I can see nothing but dark air. The house leans a little, too, as though it’ll topple over if a big wind howls through the property.

“What about the house?” Mom patiently asks, dabbing at some drool at the corner of Aunt Amelia’s mouth.

Turning toward her bedside table seems to take every ounce of strength Aunt Amelia can call up, but she reaches into the drawer and pulls out a key on a coiled stretchy thing and hands it to Mom. “It’s yours.”

“The key? What for?”

“The key is just a *key*,” Aunt Amelia snaps. “What’s important is that it opens the front door. Of the house. Which is yours.”

Mom protests, “It’s not mine. It’s not even your house.”

“Oh, but it is, Serena. I just never said. Old Mr. Thornewood’s will deeded it to me at the turn of this century. I’ve just rented it out to unsuspecting people.”

“Then why did you stay in that funny little cottage?” I blurt out.

“The big house is a place for families to dwell in, and not very happily up to this point, I might add. All those ill-spirited, spoiled girls. You’ll change that, Shelby Constance.”

“I will? How?”

“With kindness,” she spits out irritably. “You’ll tie up loose ends,” but she never explains what those loose ends are. “You children have been through too much these past months. You need a distraction — a game, if you will. I’ve set up an interesting situation for you to remember me by. You’re bright enough to figure it all out, you and the boy. As for me, I’ve had all I want of that house and its unsavory history. Now, the cottage is a different story. It is my home. Was. I won’t be going back there.”

The key jingles from Mom’s wrist. “Don’t be silly. I’ll take you home with me until you’re feeling strong enough to return to the cottage.”

“You are *not* listening to me!” Aunt Amelia rasps.

Just then, a nurse comes in, gloved in purple and pointing a syringe. “Time for your antibiotic injection, Miss Stanhope.”

Aunt Amelia waves her away. “No need to stick a fork in me to see if I’m done. I can tell you flat out, I’m overdone.”

“Could you come back in a few minutes?” Mom asks, and the nurse hurls her latex gloves in the trash and kicks the door closed behind her.

“She’s unfit to serve the ailing,” Aunt Amelia mutters. “As I was saying, the paperwork is done, the house is now yours, Serena.”

“We already have our own house,” I protest.

Ignoring me, Aunt Amelia continues, “Now, Serena, hear me: You’re in need of a change to get away from that scoundrel who left you high and dry.”

By *scoundrel*, she means Dad. She’s almost as mad at him as I am, and suddenly I like her better.

“The house is just the thing for you and Shelby Constance and, what’s your name, boy?”

“Bradley,” Brian says, and I nearly crack up.

“Ah, yes, Bradley, like the great general.”

“I expect you’ll move into the house shortly after I’m planted in a muddy grave at Gates of Eternal Oblivion.”

“Let’s talk about your getting well,” Mom insists, grasping Aunt Amelia’s hand, which is dotted with brown age spots.

“Oh, piffle!” Aunt Amelia slides her hand away and kneads it with her other hand. I think her bones hurt. “Now, one word of warning, Serena: Don’t let those fool television people into the house.”

My ears perk up. “What television people, Aunt Amelia?”

“Pushy producers from some cable station. They’ve got their greedy eyes on the house for one of those ludicrous reality shows, *America’s Most Amazing*. Cinder Creek has some history, all right, but it’s nobody’s business but yours now, and Shelby Constance, mark my words: It’s up to you to fit all the pieces together.”

“What pieces, Aunt Amelia?” I hate jigsaw puzzles. And now I’ve got puzzle pieces and loose ends and no clue as to what she’s talking about.

“Those television people pestered me all last month about it, but don’t you give in, hear, Serena? Consider it my dying wish.”

Mom starts to say, “No more talk about —” but I interrupt with a startling question:

“What’s so special about the house that *America’s Most Amazing* is interested?” More loose ends?

Aunt Amelia presses her thin white lips together and refuses to answer, which only makes me more curious, not to mention mad. Then she reaches under her pillow and pulls out an envelope for Mom. “Enough in here for you to start that computer soup business you’ve been nattering on about.”

Mom’s eyebrows shoot up. *SerenaStockPot.com* has been her dream for years, but there’s never been the money to make it come true.

“Aunt Amelia, I can’t . . .”

“Nonsense. You’re my only living relative.”

What about Brian and me? Aren’t we alive?

“Am I to take a fistful of money to my grave for the worms to chew on?” Aunt Amelia pats Mom’s hand. “Now, there’s just one small detail about the house: He’s called Canto Caliberti. Well, that’s his theatrical name, not his Christian, given name. He’s the new owner of my cottage, which he’ll be occupying from now until they carry him out in a box. It shouldn’t be long. Lord, the man’s even older than I am.” She goes into a coughing

fit, holding the sheet up to her lips, and when she settles down, she says, “General Bradley, come here.” Brian steps forward, but not too close. “You too, Shelby Constance.” I elbow Brian out of the way so I can be in front. Just a big-sister habit, I guess.

“Children have been my life and work, teaching the little rascals, though I thank the good Lord I never had to put up with any of my own. I have a gift for you. Lean in,” she commands, and I do, holding my breath against the vitamin smell. Ugh. “This is my gift: Don’t be too picky about loving someone, understand?”

“Hunh-uh,” Brian says, rearing back.

“You will, in the fullness of time.” Her hand slides under her pillow again, and she pulls out a floppy gold-colored lacy thing about the size of a dinner plate. She thrusts it into my hands. “Don’t lose it, Shelby Constance.”

“I won’t, but what is it?” I turn it over and see that it’s got a center indentation about three inches across. “Oh, is it a hat?”

“Clever child. A hat precisely. It belongs to Isabella.”

“Whoever Isabella is, she must have a very small head and an even smaller brain.”

Aunt Amelia wrinkles her brow; I can’t believe it

could be any more wrinkled than it already was. “Small head and no brain a’tall. Isabella is a doll.”

I’m about to blurt something out, like, “Why on earth are you giving me a doll’s hat when there’s no doll under it?” but Mom’s look freezes the words on my tongue.

“Miss Isabella has many friends, Shelby Constance. You’ll meet them. Lord knows we all need friends in high places. Tuck that thought into your mind.”

I just nod, but the thought in my mind is, *I hope I never get this old and weird.*

“And for General Bradley?” Once again she pulls a treasure out from under her pillow — a huge, fancy pipe. “Yours,” she says, thrusting it into Brian’s hand.

It rattles when he turns it over. He’s got to be wondering what he’s supposed to do with an old pipe. It’s got a very long, curvy stem with a gold braid tassel hanging from it, and a deep porcelain barrel that’s hinged.

“’Twas Mr. Thornewood’s pipe, a gift from the king of Sweden. Ceremonial, not for smoking. I do so love the scent of fresh tobacco,” she says dreamily. “Up until this pneumonia bout, I smoked a pipe myself, you know.”

Just thinking of Aunt Amelia puffing away is hilarious, and I don’t dare look at Brian, who’s got his hand clasped over his mouth to keep from snorting out a laugh.

“Are you a chess player, General Bradley?” asks Aunt Amelia.

“Yes, ma’am.” Finally she’s speaking his language.

“Good, fine. I never cottoned to the game, though Canto did his best to teach me. He’s a grand master or some such rubbish. Now scat, all of you, or you’re going to witness something you’ll wish you hadn’t.”

Mom leans in to kiss our old aunt again. “Rest in peace,” Mom says, tears filling her eyes.

“I expect,” Aunt Amelia replies.