



MARYBETH MAYHEW WHALEN

EVERY
MOMENT
SINCE

"Every Moment Since is everything you want in a novel—
a gripping story, nostalgia for lost childhood, exorbitant
love, a deep sense of place, and page-turning tension."

—PATTI CALLAHAN HENRY,

New York Times bestselling author of *The Secret Life of Flora Lea*

A NOVEL

Every Moment Since

Marybeth Mayhew Whalen



HARPER MUSE

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IN HONOR OF

Jonathan Kushner, age 11

Missing October 28, 1973

Etan Patz, age 6

Missing May 25, 1979

Adam Walsh, age 6

Missing July 27, 1981

John Gosch, age 12

Missing September 5, 1982

Kevin Collins, age 10

Missing February 10, 1984

Jacob Wetterling, age 11

Missing October 22, 1989

And the families who loved them.

Their brave stories inspired and informed this story.

All I discovered is . . . there is no end to grief,
that's how we know there is no end to love.

—BONO

HARPER
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Part 1

Thursday–Friday
April 27–28, 2006



HARPPER
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Prologue

He was a boy back at summer camp, swinging on a rope out over the lake. He wasn't ready to let go yet, but he felt his grip slipping, gravity pulling him toward the water in spite of his efforts to cling. Then he heard a loud ringing sound. His eyes flew open, ending the dream. His head jerked up from where it had come to rest on his chest, his neck protesting the sudden movement. He scrambled for the phone before it could ring again.

"Yes?" He hoped the person on the other end couldn't hear the sleep still in his voice. It was eleven o'clock in the morning, not a time Pete Lancaster should be sleeping.

"Sheriff?" Jane Crutcher, the department's receptionist, asked. He thought he heard a note of judgment in her voice, but maybe he was projecting his own guilt for falling asleep on the job. He was supposed to be on baby duty while his exhausted wife got some rest. He looked around but saw no sign of his wife, no stirring from his infant son, asleep in the Moses basket next to him in the family room. He'd nodded off, yes. But he was still at his post.

"Yeah." He stifled a yawn and looked at the baby.

"A call came in that I don't think I should hand off to a deputy," Jane said. Pete sat up a little straighter, a little more awake.

"Ok," he said without taking his eyes off his son.

"A guy called—some business developer out of Arkansas."

“Uh-huh.” So far this was not a reason to interrupt him on his day off.

“He bought the old Oxendine property. You know, out on Sims Church Road?”

“Yeah.” He was growing annoyed with Jane. He wanted to say, *Just spill it already*, but refrained. Jane believed in setting the stage before starting the action.

“Wait a minute,” she said. “If he’s from Arkansas, you don’t think they’re planning to put a Walmart out there, do you?”

The sheriff couldn’t tell if she was excited or dismayed at the prospect, but he didn’t care. “Jane, why’d he call?” He tried his best to sound kind and gentle. Beside him, his son stirred, a single baby fist jabbing the air.

“Sorry. Got off track. He said he was out walking the property and came upon some old outbuilding. He went inside and, well, it sounds like he found something.” She paused.

“What?”

“A jacket,” she breathed. “He knew about the Malcor kid being from here—I mean, who doesn’t?—so he figured he should ask us to come out and have a look at it. You know, just in case it’s something.”

Pete sat and absorbed what she’d said. As he processed, she hurried to add, “It’s probably nothing. I mean, what are the odds that it has anything to do with Davy Malcor’s case?”

Pete didn’t have to think about the answer. “Likely nothing,” he said. “Likely nothing at all.” He took a deep breath and shook his head to dispel the cobwebs of sleep still hanging in his brain. He was exhausted all the time these days. He never should’ve let his young new wife talk him into a kid. His others were nearly grown and he was too old to be starting all this again. He looked down at his sleeping son and thought of

Davy Malcor's parents as he stood.

"Still," he said, "I better head out there and take a look."

"I thought that's what you'd say." Jane sounded pleased with herself.

"Jane," he said, using his sternest sheriff voice, "let's keep this between us till I have a look-see."

"Ok, Pete. Mum's the word."

"I'll be in touch," he said and ended the call. He stood still for a moment, taking in what the call could mean, the implications of that jacket—though it was probably not *the* jacket—being found. If it hadn't been found by now, it was probably gone, same as Davy. That was the only thing that made good, rational sense. Still, Pete had been in the job long enough to know that a lot of things that happened did not make good, rational sense.

Beside him, his son gave a little squeak, a warning that he would be waking soon, no doubt hungry and angry. Pete stooped down until his eyes were level with the baby and peered at him over the rim of the Moses basket. He pressed his index and middle fingertips to his own lips, then pressed them to his son's forehead.

Perhaps it was just a goodbye kiss, or perhaps it was a blessing bestowed. Pete didn't stop long enough to ponder what it was as he turned away to wake his sleeping wife, to tell her he had to go.

Pete pulled up his truck behind another truck—another Ford F-150, this one newer and shinier than his own. A man wearing dress pants, a dress shirt, and a tie leaned against the other truck but stood straight as Pete got out.

“Sheriff,” the man said, extending his hand. “Thanks for coming.”

“Yeah, sure thing.” Pete accepted the man’s hand and pumped it a few times. He didn’t bother asking his name; he’d find out later if he needed to.

“You found something?” Pete asked, intent on hurrying this along. He’d had strict instructions from his wife not to dilly-dally if it was nothing. The witching hour would arrive soon, the terrible time of day when the baby cried nonstop and nothing soothed him. If Pete wasn’t there for that without a good excuse, she’d never let him hear the end of it. He had to do his time walking the floor, patting and singing and swaying—anything to stop the crying, if only for a minute.

The man waved toward the expanse of land behind him. “It’s this way,” he said and set off without waiting for Pete. Pete followed, half listening as the man explained that after closing the sale that morning, he’d felt compelled to go out and walk the property, every inch of it.

“I’ve never done that before with a property,” he said. “And then I found that jacket and I thought of an episode of *Dateline* I watched with the wife a while back—she loves that show. Loves that Keith Morrison.” He looked back at Pete, who nodded even though he didn’t watch *Dateline* and didn’t care about Keith Morrison.

The man resumed walking and talking. “The episode was about Davy Malcor, about how the case had never been solved, but those parents of his—especially his mother—have never given up. I mean, I’m a parent, too, and I can’t imagine—I just don’t know . . .” He stopped talking as a rusted-out equipment building came into view. Neither of them spoke as they drew closer to the building.

“Once I found it, I tried not to touch anything else. And I called you guys right away.”

Pete studied the man as he spoke. The cop in him wondered about the guy, about his random discovery out in the middle of nowhere after all these years. His hand went to his service revolver, but he hadn't brought it along. He'd left in such a hurry that he'd forgotten all about it.

“I'd like to go in there alone,” Pete said. He felt for his cell phone in his pocket. At least he had that. But he'd brought it along only because his wife had made him promise to answer if she called. Sometimes he thought his fearless bride was actually afraid of their ten-pound son.

“Oh yeah, of course,” the man said. “I'll just wait out here.”

Pete eyed him. “You got a business card on you?”

“Yeah, yeah, sure,” he said. The man felt around in his pockets, then held up his hands, looking sheepish. “I've got one in the truck. Tell you what, I'll go get it while you're looking around in there. I think you'll see the jacket, no problem. I pulled it out about halfway but dropped it like a hot potato when I realized what it was.”

Pete nodded but said nothing. In his mind he was already inside the little falling-down building coming eye to eye with either a castoff from one of the Oxendine boys from long ago or telltale evidence in one of the biggest missing child cases in America. He feared and welcomed this moment. It was the kind of thing that could make or break a career. It had darn near broken two of his predecessors', what with the outcry about a botched investigation for the first one, and the defamation lawsuit from the main suspect that cost the town money it hadn't had for the other one. He didn't want to think about what this discovery could mean for his own career. Was he prepared for

this? No. Did he have a choice but to proceed? Also no. He took a step toward the building, but the man's voice stopped him.

"I saw that *Dateline* back then," he said. "And not long ago I saw a segment on one of those morning shows about that boy's brother writing a memoir."

Pete wanted to hurry the guy along, same as he'd had to hurry Jane along on the phone. But he held his tongue.

"I've seen that jacket is what I'm saying," the man continued, "in the photos of that boy wearing it." He pointed at the old building. "And that's the jacket that's in there. It's dirty, and it's been in the elements a long time. But I'd bet my life on it."

Pete nodded as his heart began to thump hard against his ribs.

"I'll be along directly," was all he said.

"Ok," the man replied. "I'll just be waiting up there by the trucks." Pete waited until the man was out of sight before he opened the door, the rusty hinges crying out in protest as he entered the building.

**From *Every Moment Since: A Memoir*
by Thaddeus Malcor**

PUBLISHED SEPTEMBER 20, 2005

The farmer died the year before and his widow let the vast fields in front of their home go fallow. The land was left unplanted yet ready for whatever came next—perhaps another crop after the widow’s period of grieving had passed, perhaps the sale of the family land, perhaps the site of a missing child case that would haunt the town of Wynotte, North Carolina, for years to come.

I often wonder what would’ve happened if the widow had planted a crop that year. The wide-open fields would not have beckoned to us if corn stalks had stood in our way. We would not have gathered there to play our night games. The stranger would not have seen the flashlight beams bouncing as we ran and hid, prey for a predator, moving shadows under a crescent moon. If the fields had been planted, none of it would have happened the way it did, and my brother, Davy Malcor, would still be here.

Don’t get me wrong, I don’t blame the widow. From what I’ve gathered, she was elderly and unwell. The farm had been a lot to keep up with before her husband died. And the land was worth more to one of the many developers sniffing around Wynotte in the mid-1980s as northerners migrated south, businesses moved head-

quarters to warmer climes, and their transplanted employees spilled over city borders and into our small town, looking for a place to settle. Letting the land go fallow was the first step in letting go.

The widow, like me, had no idea what one decision would set in motion, the many lives that would forever be changed because of it. She and I would both have to live the rest of our lives with the decisions we made. Decisions that, at the time, seemed inconsequential, yet proved to be anything but.

HARPER
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Chapter 1

Thaddeus Malcor

They had a good crowd. That was what the bookstore owner said. From the podium at the front of the room, Thaddeus surveyed the gathering of strangers, deciding for himself if it was a good crowd. What made a good crowd? The number of people who showed up? The level of enthusiasm? The number of pretty women in attendance? Some combination thereof? In all his travels promoting his bestselling memoir, he still wasn't sure.

Maybe a good crowd was one that made him forget his guilt for a while, kept his focus on what he'd written, not on what he'd left out. Thaddeus put his hand in the left pocket of his jeans, feeling for the object he always kept there. He rubbed his index finger across its solidness, then withdrew his hand.

"I'll take questions now," Thaddeus said, his stomach clenching with nerves as he segued from the reading to open the floor. The Q&A was always a crapshoot. He hoped the good crowd had some good questions, though he'd likely been posed all the questions possible at this point. He'd been touring so long the questions ran together like the faces and locations.

His initial book tour had been slated for a few weeks, but as sales escalated, so did requests for more dates. Months later,

he was tired of being on the road, yet hesitant to come off it. Because, what then? What next? Until he could answer that question, he would keep saying yes to whatever his publicist sent his way. A rotary club in LaCrosse, Wisconsin? Yes. A ladies' luncheon at a country club in Savannah, Georgia? Yes. What about a short tour in the UK? Hell yes.

A few tentative hands went up.

"Yes?" he asked, pointing to an older woman three rows back. She wore a dark, pilling sweater and a concerned expression.

She glanced around before speaking, as if making sure it was indeed her he'd designated. He gave her an encouraging nod.

"I wondered," she said, "how your family feels about the book?"

This question was not unexpected, but a little early. Usually the crowd warmed up to asking about his family. But he did not falter; he had his answer, a reassuring half-truth at the ready.

"My family is supportive of the book and proud of its success—that so many people are interested in Davy's story. While what happened is a tragedy, they're glad I'm sharing the message"—he leaned forward as he always did and scanned the crowd, making eye contact with as many people as he could—"That you *can* move forward from tragedy. It's not easy, but it's possible." He eased back to his former stance, relaxing a little. "Though I'm the only one standing here, I speak for my family when I say hope is Davy's legacy."

He watched as heads nodded and found himself nodding along with them, caught up in his own rhetoric. Though what he said about his family's support wasn't completely true, he wanted it to be. And didn't that count for something? Never mind that his mother hadn't read beyond the first few chapters. Never mind that his sister had discouraged her book club from

selecting it because it was “just too painful.” Never mind that, while his father had read the whole thing, the note of praise he sent mentioned his disappointment in the chapter on the hotline.

“It seemed you laid the blame for the divorce squarely on my shoulders,” he’d written, effectively negating all the nice things he’d said prior. His mom, dad, and sister just didn’t understand. It was his memoir, his memories. Or a version of them, the only version he dared to share with total strangers.

He slipped his hand back into his left pocket, this time pressing his index finger hard against the object’s sharp edge, just enough to hurt.

“Next question,” he said.

For the next twenty minutes he answered the usual questions: What led you to write this book? Did you always want to be a writer? What are you working on next? How did you get published? And one he’d never had: Did you listen to any music while writing?

“I did, actually.” He smiled at the memory of being in that cabin in Wyoming with the fellowship he’d landed, music playing, words flowing, alone but not lonely. It was as if Davy had come back to him there, had given him his blessing. And wasn’t that the only blessing he needed?

“I listened to hits from 1985,” he told them. “The music really took me back to that time. And the *Back to the Future* soundtrack, of course.” Anyone who’d read the book knew how much Davy loved that movie, which had come out the summer before he disappeared.

To his right Thaddeus caught the eye of a beautiful woman with long red hair. She smiled at him in that way some women smiled at him now. More than a smile, it was an invitation of

sorts. He gave her a brief half smile in return. He was always a sucker for a redhead. She raised her hand.

“Someone asked about your family’s response to the book,” she said. “But I want to know, what about the girl next door? Has she reached out at all since the book was published?”

He rolled his eyes as he did anytime someone asked this question, and the crowd laughed as the crowd did anytime he answered this question. Larkin. He hadn’t named her in the book. He was too much of a chicken to do that after all the years of silence between them. But she’d been part of the story, part of that night, part of the before, and the after. He did not name her, but he could not have left her out either. So he’d referred to her as “the girl next door,” which she was. But of course, she was so much more than that—his first love (though he hadn’t understood that until it was too late), an eyewitness to his family’s pain, and the one who got away.

“No,” he said, making his voice sound wistful, gathering sympathy from the onlookers. Was it manipulative to do so? Did he deserve their sympathy? He couldn’t answer that; the show had to go on. “The girl next door has not reached out.” He shrugged. “I have no idea if she’s read the book or not. I kind of hope she hasn’t.” He gave a dramatic grimace that made everyone laugh again.

In the back the bookstore owner held up her arm and pointed at her watch, the signal that it was time to invite the crowd to form a queue at the signing table, where he would answer more questions, scrawl his name over and over, and make the joke about the signature adding another quarter to the value at a garage sale in the future. That joke always worked.

He thanked the people for coming, remarked on them being

a good crowd, then made his way over to the table, where he sank into the chair the store had provided and picked up the black Sharpie pen laid out for him. His back ached from standing, and he felt the nagging weariness that crept in whenever he was still. He watched with a kind of detachment as the line formed, snaking all the way back into the store's shelves.

Off to the side the bookstore owner gave him a thumbs-up. Just behind her, he spotted the beautiful redhead who'd asked the last question of the night, standing with a friend. The redhead kept looking from him to the line that had formed and back again before finally tugging on her friend and pulling her to a spot at the very back of the line.

Thaddeus bit back a knowing smile as he asked the first woman in line how she spelled her name. There were just so many different ways to spell Cindy. And didn't she know it.

Thaddeus always attempted small talk in the mornings, offered breakfast, coffee, a shower, a ride. The one that particular morning said yes to the offer of coffee, wrapping herself in the sheet demurely as she accepted the cup and took a grateful sip. He'd forgotten her name and could not think of a polite way to discover it without asking directly. He could tell she felt bad; she never did this kind of thing, etc. He didn't want to make her feel worse.

When she excused herself to go to the bathroom, tugging the sheet free of the mattress and awkwardly clinging to it as she shuffled into the bathroom and closed the door behind her, he attempted to riffle through her small handbag to find her license. He was not above this sort of desperate act. He just

hoped she didn't catch him at it.

Voilà! He filched the license from a handy little card slot right inside, squinting through the hangover headache that was as much a part of his morning routine as the coffee he'd offered her. (They went together actually, the coffee and the headache, always joined by their old buddy, ibuprofen. He shoveled four in his mouth. Thaddeus was not kind to his liver.) He heard the toilet flush as the name on the license swam into view: Elizabeth.

He frowned in confusion as he shoved the card back into its slot, then quickly took a seat at the little table in front of the large window in his hotel room. The bathroom door opened and he sipped his coffee as though he'd been there the whole time, staring out at the view of—what city was this? Oh yes, St. Louis—instead of trying to determine the name of the stranger he'd hooked up with after the signing last night.

Elizabeth didn't sound familiar. He tried to picture himself signing her book or talking to her later in the bar, tried to recall when her friend said goodbye (there was always a friend). Had the friend called her name? It was all a blank. The only thing he could recall about their time together was the way she'd listened to his stories with such interest and intrigue, which predictably turned to desire the longer they talked, the more they drank. That was the way it always was after his signings. No one had warned him this would happen. Sometimes Thaddeus wondered if that meant he was unique. But there was no one to ask.

He decided to go for broke. "Everything ok, Elizabeth?" he asked, trying out the name even though it didn't sound right.

She returned to the bed, took a seat in the space where she'd slept—if you could call it sleeping—and gave him a quizzical

look.

“Elizabeth?” She used her free hand to smooth the sheet she was wearing.

Damn. Wrong name. He hadn’t thought to look at the photo on the license. Maybe she’d grabbed the wrong purse and it was her friend’s and not hers, which would mean it was her friend’s name. And not hers. Internally, he chastised himself. Who did he think he was? He was not cool. He was not suave. He was not a ladies’ man, no matter how often his book tour readings got him laid.

“We’re being awfully formal this morning, aren’t we?” She gave a little laugh that failed to cover up her nerves. “Last night it was all Lizzie this, Lizzie that, and this morning I’m *Elizabeth*?”

He managed to keep himself from exhaling his relief aloud. Instead he smiled at her.

“I was trying it out.”

She wrinkled her adorable nose. Something else he recalled from last night: thinking as they talked that she had a very cute nose. The woman from the last reading had a rather large nose that he’d somehow managed to disregard.

“Well, let’s drop the *Elizabeth*, please,” she said. “It’s my given name, but I’ve never gone by it. It feels like a stranger’s name.”

Her words were Thaddeus’s opening, the inevitable moment when he had to clarify what was happening between them. Which was, essentially, nothing. He had to help each woman realize that this was not the beginning of a great love affair. This was a fling in the truest sense of the word. He’d once looked up the meaning out of curiosity: *Fling (noun): a short period of enjoyment or wild behavior.*

Time to make sure Elizabeth/Lizzie knew she had just engaged in a short period of enjoyment (for both of them, he liked to think). Though some of his flings did involve wild behavior (he let the women lead; he never wanted to be accused of anything criminal—the press would have a field day if something of that nature got out), this one had not. But it didn't matter. Enjoyment was enjoyment. A pleasant evening was had by all concerned. Now it was time to decamp, so to speak. He felt bad saying what came next, but it had to be said.

“Well, isn't that what we are, Elizabeth? Strangers?”

The hand holding the sheet over her breasts tightened so much that he could see the white of her bones through her pale skin. When Elizabeth/Lizzie's hand had gone up last night to ask the question about Larkin, he'd been pretty sure she was the one he'd have this scene with. Though, of course, he hadn't pictured it happening exactly this way.

He had learned to spot the patterns: the woman's lingering position at the back of the book-signing line, her efforts to keep the conversation going to the point where he said he was hungry and could they continue talking at the bar/pub/restaurant nearby, the friend who had to be dismissed with assurances that a cab would be called later and everyone would be safe. The women were different, the questions were different (though not much), the food or drinks were different.

But one thing was consistently the same: the moment he understood that this particular woman wanted the same thing they all did. People came to his book events to get close to tragedy, to experience it as firsthand as they were comfortable with, to feel it in a way they could not merely by seeing photos and words in a book, newspaper, or magazine. They came because they wanted to see him in real life, to hear his voice, to watch

as he held the pen that wrote their names.

There was always one who found that wasn't enough. One who discovered that the closer she got to him, the closer she wanted to get. She found herself wanting to taste him, to smell him, and then, with a kind of surrender, to take him in, convincing herself she was getting as close to his pain as anyone ever had, never knowing she was nowhere near the only one or that none of them had come close to the pain he carried, buried so deep that no one had reached it. Not one single time.

HARVARD
MUSEUM



Chapter 2

Tabitha Malcor

On Fridays she made her regret list. It was nothing fancy; it didn't even have its own notebook. She certainly didn't want to save her regrets to reread later. Who wants to see that?

She simply pulled a sheet off a legal pad or her grocery list pad or a piece of copy paper from the printer. She grabbed a pen or a pencil or, when the kids were younger, a crayon. Whatever was handy, whatever was quick. The activity was not one she relished, and it was definitely not something she'd shared with anyone. It was just something she'd been doing since a particular Friday a long time ago, never intending to keep doing it, yet somehow doing it still.

Sometimes the regrets came to her immediately, as if they'd been waiting in line in her head all week. Other times she had to cast about to find some. Over the years she had formulated some rules for the list: regrets could come only from days that had elapsed since the last list—only the most current regrets were allowed. Some regrets showed up faithfully: impatience with a loved one, needless sarcasm when a gentler response would've been kinder, laziness in regard to exercise. If the regret list was meant to spur change, it hadn't worked. And yet, for reasons she could not explain, she returned to the practice

every Friday.

This morning she paused over her list, reviewing the past seven days in her mind. Over the years she'd been tempted to keep notes throughout the week in order to expedite the list-making process—a regret cheat sheet, if you will. But she decided that slowing down to recall the week, to replay the moments of regret in her mind, was part of her process. Her own kind of penance. She supposed it was akin to a Catholic confession. Marie, her best friend/next-door neighbor, was Catholic, but Tabitha wasn't sure she went to confession anymore. Tabitha wasn't sure she ever had.

Thinking of Marie brought to mind one regret from the past seven days. She wrote it down:

1. When Larkin arrived home, I did not take anything over there. I should have taken cookies or dinner or something for the little girl—a toy maybe or a coloring book. I regret that Marie's sadness has caused me to avoid her. I regret that I haven't been a good neighbor. Or friend.

Tabitha paused, thinking this over. (Sometimes the regret list took a long time to make because a lot of thinking was involved. For this reason she tried to start first thing in the morning so it didn't hang over her head all day.) Sadness still clung to Marie months after losing her husband, Jim. The real reason she had not gone over to welcome home Marie's daughter, Larkin, when she arrived was because Tabitha had been avoiding Marie.

She didn't want to see her friend's downturned mouth, her stooped shoulders. Though Marie was one of her dearest and

oldest friends in the world, she struggled with being supportive and understanding about Marie's recent loss when she had lost her own husband long ago. Not to death, mind you, but to divorce. Tabitha had faced many losses, it seemed, while Marie had only the one.

At the thought of her ex-husband, other regrets, numerous ones, popped into her mind, erratic memories exploding like popcorn in her brain. She reminded herself of the rules: nothing beyond this one week. She banished thoughts of Daniel and continued her task.

When she was done, her list was as follows:

2. I did not go for a walk except for twice, even though the weather was good every day this week. I regret not taking better care of my body.
3. I did not get on the scale this week because I was afraid. I regret that I've put myself in the position of being afraid of what the scale says. It looms in the corner of the bathroom like a beacon of my failures, flashing numbers I do not like. (See also #2.)
4. I was short with both of the kids on the phone this week. Thaddeus has just gotten so self-involved since his book became a bestseller. Talking to him has become insufferable. And Kristyn—well, it's not her fault—but one kid was singing loudly and one kid was crying as we tried to have a conversation. I know I've been there and should be more understanding, but I just couldn't handle the noise. I don't think she could really hear me anyway, so I ended the call more quickly than I should have. I regret not being the mother I should be to the children I have left.

Tabitha paused after she penned the last words. Was this venturing into past regret territory? Should she leave it? That was the problem when you made up the rules; you were always free to break them. But how to know when it was ok to do so?

She decided to leave it. Because Davy still counted. His lingering presence was current, not past. Davy was in every week, in every moment since the night he went missing.

Satisfied with her list, she nodded to herself and then she finished as she always did, writing the words *JE NE REGRETTE RIEN!!!* at the bottom of the page with a flourish. She let herself stare at the phrase for a long time, wishing this was the week that statement would become true—that she would truly regret nothing. That all her regrets—past and present—would release their hold on her and she would be free.

She relished tearing up the list into tiny bits as she always did, then dumped the bits into the bin, slamming the lid with a bit more emphasis than was necessary before she turned away to face the day.



Chapter 3

Gordon Swift

Sometimes when he was shopping or at a restaurant or at one of his parents' many doctor's appointments, he would get the sensation. That was what he'd come to call it: the sensation. And not in that old York Peppermint Pattie ad campaign kind of way. This sensation was neither exhilarating nor refreshing. This was a prickly dread crawling across the expanse of his skin.

Sure enough, he would look up and find someone—man or woman, it didn't matter—looking at him but pretending not to. Their eyes, just before they averted them, asking the same old unspoken questions: Is it him? Could it be? Surely he's not still in Wynotte.

It happened that morning as he stood in line at Booker's Hardware to purchase a large sheet of steel wool to use in his latest sculpture. The cashier, an older gentleman, kept glancing at him over the top of his reader glasses, then returning his gaze to the register. When Gordon handed over his card for him to swipe, he watched as the man checked the name on the card, then looked at him one more time. In a blink his gaze had gone from curious to venomous. It was that fast.

Each time this happened, Gordon had to suppress the urge to speak up and affirm that yes, it was him, and no, he did not

still live in that little house he'd lived in at the time of Davy Malcor's disappearance, but yes, he still lived in the small town he'd grown up in. He wanted to say he was still there because he had no reason to leave, he'd done nothing wrong. But he also wanted to explain that, while he'd love to have left long ago, he could not leave his parents, who needed his help. After all they'd gone through because of him, it was the least he could do. It was because of him that their health was failing, his fault they were now pariahs in a town his family had called home for generations.

He knew people stared at his parents, too, that they probably knew the sensation as well as he did. If anyone could understand, they would. But they didn't talk about any of it, ever. His parents were of the don't-ask-don't-tell mindset. No crying over spilt milk and all that. Better to move forward, do the best they could, and tell themselves all the while that it was enough.

But Gordon did not feel he could keep up that attitude for the rest of his life. Increasingly, he felt himself wanting to change things instead of merely accept them. He just couldn't figure out how.

He left the hardware store in a hurry, feeling eyes on his back. Would they talk about him after he left? Probably, he decided.

"You know who that was, don't you?" the cashier would say to the next person in line. And that was all it would take. They'd jaw about the missing kid, then speculate about Gordon's involvement in his disappearance. Davy Malcor would haunt him forever if he let him.

He went home, intending to work on his sculpture (this one was a commission so he actually had a deadline), but instead he went to the computer and turned it on. While he waited to

log on, he made a cup of coffee, then took a seat. He'd returned three days ago from a gallery show in Franklin, Tennessee, and needed to write a thank-you note—a real, handwritten card, not a dashed-off email—to the gallery owners for their hospitality and their continued support of his work. He just needed to search online for the correct address.

While he was online, he figured he'd check his email. He told himself it was just business, not procrastination, as he watched his inbox appear on the screen. Near the top of the list was an email from her, the woman he'd met at the gallery, the one who'd openly flirted with him, who'd asked for his card and pressed her own into his hand. She wanted to “connect” later. That was how she'd phrased it. He'd said he was heading home to North Carolina, that a connection wasn't possible. Her email made it clear she wasn't giving up that easily. She had business that took her to Charlotte, she wrote, and wasn't that close to Wynotte? She'd love to see him next time she was in town.

With a sigh he deleted her email, then shut off the computer. No point in replying. Soon enough she would find out who he was, hear what he'd been accused of doing. Gordon had learned a long time ago there was no sense in starting something that would only, inevitably, end. He hadn't always known that, and it had caused him a lot of heartache. He was wiser now; he guarded his heart better.

He walked out to his studio in the backyard, opened the door, and threw himself into his work, the one thing that had never failed him.

Chapter 4

Anissa Weaver

After Seth left that morning, she cleaned her condo top to bottom, as if she could scour him—and her own bad decision—out of the house. She cleaned the toilets, scrubbed the kitchen sink, and mopped the floors with all the force she had in her, using the exertion to push away the pesky memories of the night before: Seth as he smiled at her in that knowing way; Seth's face over hers, their breaths mingling; Seth as he showered after. As if by showering he could wash away what they'd done. She'd said as much before he left, and they fought about it. He called her crazy, a favorite word of his.

"If you regret sleeping with me so much, why do you keep doing it?" he'd asked. She could hear the hurt in his voice. *"You initiated last night, not me."*

She'd shrugged, doing her best to appear nonchalant. *"I have needs, too, you know."*

"You don't always have to come to me with your needs," he'd said. The hurt had turned to anger, tracing the outline of his words.

The problem was, she couldn't imagine doing anything but going to Seth. For a time, he'd been the love of her life, even though the marriage had failed. They'd called time of death

over a year ago, and yet these interludes continued, no matter how many times she promised herself she'd put a stop to it. Back when they were still trying to be married, their therapist had said they were both afraid of transparency, of vulnerability, of exposure. So they fought instead of talked, joked instead of being honest, left instead of staying. And then, foolishly, went back for more.

"I don't want to sleep with a stranger," she'd retorted, intentionally keeping her tone light, breezy. In lieu of a response, Seth had walked out the door. At least he hadn't slammed it.

She wished she had to work today, wished something big would happen so she'd get called in even though it was her day off. But that was the thing about being the Public Information Officer for the sleepy town of Wynotte's police department; there wasn't much to inform the public about. No one really needed to know that Myra Stockton had called the ambulance last night for the thirteenth time this year. The truth was, whatever the public needed to know in this town didn't require Anissa's input. The gossip mill worked faster and more efficiently, if a person wasn't fussy about facts.

She was grateful her job involved other responsibilities—victim advocacy, liaising with the mayor's office, and public relations for the department, putting on a good face for the press whenever possible. Anissa was happy to do whatever needed doing; she was one of those weirdos who truly loved her job. Once she'd told Seth it was her calling, and he'd teased her about it for days. But she'd meant it.

She went looking for the TV remote, moved out of her way in her cleaning frenzy, only to spy her phone where the remote usually sat. The screen said she had three missed calls from Pete Lancaster, the sheriff. She smiled as all thoughts of Seth re-

treated from her mind as surely as if she'd swept them out with the broom. If Pete was calling her on her day off—and his—it meant something had happened. Inside her a small voice said, "*Finally.*"

She called Pete back and waited for him to answer with that familiar "*This is Pete,*" in a slightly exasperated tone, like she'd just pulled him from something far more important. Right now the thing that was more important, she knew, was his newborn son.

Pete didn't answer, so she hung up and sank into the couch to wait for him to see her missed call. If she left a message, he wouldn't listen to it anyway. She got up and went to the window, scanned the minuscule patch of grass the condominium complex counted as a yard for a sign of the cat that had been hanging around lately, a skinny, skittish Siamese. It always darted away before she could try to help it.

Her phone's ring pulled her away from the window. She snatched it up and answered, her "Hello?" coming out far less poised and professional than she'd intended. *Rein it in,* she cautioned herself.

"Niss?" The female voice on the other end was not what she expected. Her sister Marissa chuckled. "You're awfully happy to hear from me."

Anissa rolled her eyes. "I thought you were Pete."

"Pete?" Marissa exclaimed. "A guy named Pete is calling you? This is news!" Marissa was clearly thrilled at the mention of a guy other than Seth.

"Pete Lancaster," Anissa said dully. "The sheriff."

"Oh." Marissa's voice went flat. "I didn't know his first name was Pete."

"Are you calling for a reason?" Anissa asked, barely conceal-

ing her impatience. She wanted to talk to Pete about whatever he'd been calling about, not get grilled about her love life by her nosy sister.

"Actually, I was probably calling about the same thing as Pete," Marissa said. A smug eagerness filled her voice.

"What?" Anissa breathed, her impatience with her sister quickly replaced by intrigue.

"They found that kid's jacket," Marissa said. She paused before adding, "Well, that's what they think it is, at least."

Anissa didn't have to ask what kid Marissa meant. She knew. Everyone in Wynotte knew. Or at least, everyone who'd been around for any time at all. Davy Malcor was a legend in this town, a cautionary tale, a ghost story whispered on the darkest nights.

Twenty-one years after eleven-year-old Davy Malcor had gone missing from a cornfield while playing games with his friends in the dark, everyone had theories on what had happened to him. His was the town's most famous case, one that still cropped up every so often—when some crackpot in prison confessed to abducting him, when supposed new evidence emerged, or when the press decided to run an anniversary story, reminding everyone about the cold case, lest Davy be forgotten. But of course, he was never forgotten. Davy Malcor was out of sight but never out of Wynotte's collective conscience.

Marissa continued. "I knew you especially would want to know. I mean—"

"Where'd you hear this?" Anissa cut her off. Her question was based on her graduate training and subsequent experience in managing public information: Don't believe what you hear unless it's been verified by a reliable source. Her sister was not what the police department would deem a reliable source. And

yet, Pete *had* called her three times while she was cleaning. He was probably pissed that she wasn't available when he needed her, day off or not.

Anissa began to change from her sweats into something more presentable as Marissa explained what she'd heard. The gossip was that the guy who'd bought the Oxendine land had found the jacket while walking the property—and not just a scrap of fabric but a whole, intact jacket, a very distinct jacket that anyone with access to media had seen at one point or another.

Anissa could picture the jacket, but not from the photos in the news. She'd seen it with her own eyes. Davy himself had shown it to her—on a warm autumn night, far too hot to be wearing a jacket, but Davy had showed it off even as sweat formed on his brow and dripped into his large brown eyes.

"My neighbor Sarah—you remember her?" Marissa continued, unaware that Anissa had all but stopped listening, lost in her own thoughts, her own private memories.

"Yeah," Anissa lied, tugging on jeans fresh from the dryer, glad she'd done laundry.

"Well, her husband works for the commercial real estate agency that sold the guy that property. He drove out there and said it's all taped off and cops are there." Marissa paused. "I'm stunned you haven't heard."

Her phone signaled an incoming call. "I gotta go! That's Pete on the other line." She hung up on Marissa in time to catch the call.

"Hello?" she asked, breathless and anxious.

"I assume you've heard the news." Pete wasted no time.

"Yep, already misinformation to start managing," she said.

"The story's making its way through town."

“That’s why I need you to get to the Malcor home,” Pete said. “Be with them as much as they’ll allow. Help them ward off the press as we figure out what’s happening. I don’t want them divulging anything until we’re ready to make an official statement. See if you can help them understand the importance of that.”

“I can do that,” Anissa said, willing herself to sound confident. It seemed she had waited her whole life for this moment, but she wasn’t sure she was ready now that it had come. She thought of the games they played as kids. “*Ready or not, here I come,*” they’d called.

“Good girl,” Pete said. It should bother her that he’d called her a girl, but she was too thrilled by his praise to correct him.

“One more thing,” Pete added, his voice dropping an octave as he spoke again. “And this isn’t for public knowledge. I think we’re close this time.”

“Really?” Anissa breathed, incredulous. In the two decades since Davy disappeared, there’d been supposed sightings, false confessions, and continued efforts on the part of the family to keep the investigation open—all things that brought the press to town, sniffing around at the possibility of the case finally being solved. Anissa wanted to say she’d always believed it would happen one day. But was that really true? Had she lost hope along the way? She didn’t want to think that way, even for a second.

“We’re as close as we’ve ever been,” the sheriff said.

“Wow,” Anissa said. The word sounded inane and inadequate, but she couldn’t take it back.

A moment of silence passed between them before Pete said, “Okay, well, you best get over there before the press starts camping out on their lawn. I’ll send some uniforms over to

help with that. Do you need the address? This case has been quiet for a few years. I'm not sure you've had cause to go over there since you started this job."

"No," Anissa said. "I know. Where they live." The sheriff didn't need to know why. She'd prefer he never did.

HARPPER
MUSE



About the Author



Kristee Mays Photography

MARYBETH MAYHEW WHALEN is the author of the forthcoming novel *Every Moment Since* (out fall of 2024) and nine previous novels. Marybeth received a BA degree in English with a concentration in Writing and Editing from NC State University a long time ago and has been writing ever since. She is the co-founder of The Book Tide, an online community of readers where “a rising tide raises all books.” Marybeth and her husband Curt are the parents of six children, with only one left at home. A native of Charlotte, NC, Marybeth now calls Sunset Beach, NC home.

Visit her online at: <https://linktr.ee/Marybethwhalen>