

## ***Fox River***

### CHAPTER ONE

The citizens of Ridge's Race, Virginia said that Maisy Fletcher lived her life like a pack of foxhounds torn between two opposing lines of scent. She had worn many disguises in her fifty years, each of them clearly revealing the flighty, distractable woman beneath. Jake Fletcher, her husband of twenty years disagreed. Jake claimed that his wife had no trouble making up her mind.

Over and over and over again.

Today, those who knew Maisy would have been shocked to see the purpose in her stride and the lack of attention she paid to everything and everyone that stood between her and the front door of the Gandy Willson Clinic, just outside historic Leesburg. She ignored the brass horsehead mounting posts flanking the brick sidewalk, the twin magnolias flanking the portico. She paid little attention to the young couple sitting stiffly on a green bench under the magnolia to her left. More telling, she brushed right past the young security guard who asked for her identification.

"Ma'am, you can't go in there without my seeing some I.D.," the young man said, following close at her heels.

Maisy paused just long enough to turn and survey him. He looked like an escapee from the Virginia Military Institute, hair shaved nearly to the scalp, acne scars still faintly visible, teeth perfectly straightened. He had the same faintly hostile stare she associated with new cadets, a product of exhaustion and harassment.

Normally she might have winked or stopped to question him about his upbringing, his opinion of the Washington Redskins chances this season, his take on the presidential election. Today she turned her back on him. "Don't

try to stop me, son. I'm as harmless as a butterfly in a hailstorm. Just go on about your business."

"Ma'am, I have to--"

"My daughter's a patient here."

"I'm going to have to call--"

She reached for the door handle and let herself in.

She had never been inside the Gandy Willson clinic. She'd known about the place, of course. Through the years acquaintances had disappeared into its confines for periods of "rest." Some of them boasted of time spent here, adding "G.W.S." after their names like an academic achievement. "G.W.S." or Gandy Willson Survivor was a local code, meaning "Don't even offer me a drink," or "Give me the strongest drink in the house," depending on the length of time out of treatment.

Now Maisy wasn't surprised by what she saw. Gandy Willson catered to the wealthy elite. The chandelier gracing a cathedral ceiling was glittering crystal, the carpet stretching before her had probably robbed a dozen third world children of a normal adolescence. The walls were painted a sage green and the serene oil landscapes dotting them were originals.

The young security guard hadn't followed her inside, but another, older man, strode from his office to head her off as she stepped farther into the reception area. She guessed he was in his sixties, bespectacled, perfectly tailored and attempting, without success, to smile like somebody's grandfather.

"I don't believe we've met." He extended his hand. "I'm Harmon Jeffers, director of Gandy Willson."

She debated taking it, but gave in when she saw the hand wavered with age. She grasped it to steady him. "I'm Maisy Fletcher, and my daughter Julia Warwick is a patient here."

"Julia's mother. Of course." His unconvincing smile was firmly in place.

There was no "of course" about it. Maisy and Julia were as different from one another as a rose and a hibiscus. For all practical purposes they were members of the same general family, but the resemblance ended there. This month Maisy's hair was red and sadly overpermed. Julia's was always sleek and black. Maisy had gained two unwanted pounds for every year she'd lived. Julia might as well survive on air. Maisy was big-boned and nearly average height. Fine-boned Julia barely topped her shoulder.

And those were the ways they were most alike.

Maisy drew herself up to her full five foot five, something she rarely did, and the small of her back creaked in protest. "I'm here to see my daughter."

"This isn't the best place to discuss this, Mrs. Fletcher. Shall we go into my office? I'll have tea sent and we can chat."

"That's very old Virginia of you, Dr. Jeffers, but I don't think I have the time. I'd appreciate your help finding Julia's room. I hate barging in on strangers."

"We can't let you do that."

"Good. Then you'll tell me where she is?"

"Mrs. Fletcher, it's imperative we talk. Your daughter's recovery depends on it."

Maisy lifted the first of several chins. The others followed sluggishly. "My daughter shouldn't be here and you shouldn't have anything to do with her recovery, sir."

"You disagree that your daughter needs treatment?"

"My daughter should be at home with the people who love her."

He put his hand on her shoulder to steer her away from the door. The young couple who'd been sitting on the bench entered and shuffled lethargically across the carpet.

He spoke when they were out of earshot. "Mrs. Warwick's husband feels differently. He feels she needs to be here, where she can rest and receive therapy every day."

Maisy allowed the doctor to edge her out of the way, but only a few feet. She cut straight to the point, as unusual for her as the anger simmering inside her. "Just exactly how many cases of hysterical blindness have you treated?"

"This is a psychiatric clinic. We--"

"Mostly treat substance abusers," she finished for him. "Drug addicts. Alcoholics. My daughter is neither. But she might be by the time she gets out of here. You'll drive her crazy."

"We don't use terms like 'crazy' here, but there are people who will say your daughter is well on her way." He lifted a bushy white eyebrow in exclamation. "There is *nothing* wrong with her eyes, yet she doesn't see. For all practical purposes she's totally blind. Surely you're not trying to tell me this is a normal event?"

She drew a deep breath and spaced her words carefully, as much for order as for emphasis. "I am trying to tell you that this is not the right setting for her treatment." The words began to tumble faster. "My son-in-law brought her here directly from the hospital because he didn't want Julia to embarrass him. She *came* because he threatened her. She's not here because she believes you can help her."

"If you haven't spoken to her, and I know for a fact that you haven't since she's not allowed to receive phone calls just yet, then how do you know this?"

"Because I know my daughter."

“Do you, Mrs. Fletcher?”

That stopped her, as he probably knew that it would. She supposed that with all the good doctor’s training, finding an Achilles heel was as elementary as prescribing the trendiest psychotropic drug.

She took a moment to regroup, to focus her considerable energy on what she had to do. “I will see my daughter.” She surprised herself and said it without blinking, without breaking eye contact. “Either you can help me, or you can help me make a scene. If you know anything about me at all, you know I excel at dramatics.”

“We’ll sit and talk a few minutes. If you’re still convinced you must see Mrs. Warwick, then we’ll send a nurse to see what she says. If she agrees . . .”

“We’ll sit and talk a few minutes, then I *will* see my daughter.”

He hesitated before he gave a brief nod. “If you’re still inclined that way. But if she doesn’t want you here, you’ll have to leave.”

She threw up her ring-cluttered hands.

He led her down the hallway to the doorway he’d come through. His office was much as she’d expected. Leather furniture, dark paneled walls covered with multiple framed diplomas, a desk as massive as a psychiatrist’s ego. She had always wondered if professional men measured the size of their desks the way adolescent boys measured their penises.

“Make yourself comfortable.”

She sank back against the cushions of a sofa and knew immediately that she’d made an error. She had only two choices, to perch on the sofa’s edge like a child in the principal’s office or settle back as she had and appear completely defenseless. She was sure the stage had been set that way.

Dr. Jeffers sat forward, cupping his hands over his blotter and nodded sagely. “So you don’t believe this is the right place for Mrs. Warwick.”

Maisy glanced at her watch. Jake had given it to her on her last birthday. It was an insubstantial rhinestone and pearl encrusted bauble, and she wore it with everything. Now she wished the hands would move faster.

"This is my daughter we're talking about. No one knows her better than I do, which is not the same as saying I know everything about her. But I do understand this. She hates it here, and she probably hates everything you're trying to accomplish. She is a private person. Her strength comes from within. She will not want to share those strengths or any weaknesses that come with them with a stranger. You are a stranger."

"And she will want to share them with you?"

"I do wish you'd stop putting words in my mouth."

"Correct me, then, but I'm under the impression you think you can help her where I can't."

"Being with the people who love her will help her. I know she's desperate to see Callie--"

"You can't possibly know these things, Mrs. Fletcher. Perhaps you're projecting? Your daughter's spoken to no one except her husband since she arrived."

"I know she's desperate to see Callie," Maisy repeated a bit louder. "I know my daughter. Are you listening or aren't you? She is a mother, a wonderful mother, she will be frantic to see her little girl. If you think a frantic woman is a good candidate for therapy, then you need to go back to medical school!"

"There is only one frantic woman in this clinic, and she's sitting across from me," he said with his pseudo-grandfatherly smile.

With some difficulty Maisy hoisted herself to her feet, but before she could say anything the telephone on his desk rang. As he picked up the receiver he held up a hand to stop her from leaving. His replies were succinct and unrevealing. When he'd finished he glanced up and shrugged.

"It seems you're not the only frantic woman in this clinic, after all. Your daughter knows you're here."

Maisy waited.

He rose. "She's demanding to see you. Her room is upstairs. Follow the corridor to the end, turn left and you'll see the staircase. At the top make your first left, then a right. Her room is at the end of the hall."

She turned without a word, but his next words stopped her.

"It's my responsibility to notify Mr. Warwick that you've visited Mrs. Warwick against medical advice."

"Dr. Jeffers, are you a psychiatrist or a spy?"

"Dear lady, you have some mental health issues you might work on yourself. Please don't stay too long. I don't want my work with your daughter disrupted."

It was a *testament* to her mental health that she left without responding.