The Lace Reader

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PART ONE

The Lace Reader must stare at the piece of lace until the pattern blurs and the face of the Seeker disappears completely behind the veil. When the eyes begin to fill with tears and the patience is long exhausted, there will appear a glimpse of something not quite seen.

In this moment an image will begin to form . . . in the space between what is real and what is only imagined.

—THE LACE READER'S GUIDE

Chapter 1

My name is Towner Whitney. No, that's not exactly true. My real first name is Sophya. Never believe me. I lie all the time.

I am a crazy woman. . . . That last part is true.

My little brother, Beezer, who is kinder than I, says the craziness is genetic. *We're from five generations of crazy,* he says, as if it were a badge he's proud to wear, though he admits that I may have taken it to a new level.

Until I came along, the Whitney family was what the city of Salem fondly refers to as "quirky." If you were old Salem money, even if that money was long gone, you were never referred to as "crazy." You might be deemed "unusual," or even "oddball," but the hands-down-favorite word for such a condition was "quirky."

Throughout the generations the Whitney men have all become famous for their quirks: from the captains of sea and industry all the way down to my little brother, Beezer, who is well known within scientific circles for his articles on particle physics and string theory.

Our great-great-grandfather, for example, parlayed a crippling preoccupation with ladies' feet into a brilliant career as a captain of industry in Lynn's thriving shoe business, creating a company that was

passed down through the generations all the way to my grandfather G. G. Whitney. Our great-great-great-grandfather, who was a legitimate captain in his own right, had a penchant for sniffing cinnamon that many considered obsessive. Eventually he built a fleet of spice-trading ships that traveled the globe and made Salem one of the richest ports in the New World.

Still, anyone would admit that it is the women of the Whitney family who have taken quirky to a new level of achievement. My mother, May, for example, is a walking contradiction in terms. A dedicated recluse who (with the exception of her arrests) hasn't left her home on Yellow Dog Island for the better part of twenty years, May has nevertheless managed to revive a long-defunct lace-making industry and to make herself famous in the process. She has gained considerable notoriety for rescuing abused women and children and turning their lives around, giving the women a place in her lace-making business and home-educating their children. All this from a raging agoraphobic who gave one of her own children to her barren half sister, Emma, in a fit of generosity because, as she said at the time, there was a need, and besides, she had been blessed with a matching set.

And my Great-Aunt Eva, who is more mother to me than May ever has been, is equally strange. Running her own business well into her eighties, Eva is renowned as both Boston Brahmin and Salem witch when, really, she is neither. Actually, Eva is an old-school Unitarian with Transcendentalist tendencies. She quotes Scripture in the same breath as she quotes Emerson and Thoreau. Yet in recent years Eva has spoken only in clichés, as if use of the tired metaphor can somehow remove her from the inevitable outcomes she is paid to predict.

For thirty-five years of her life, Eva has run a ladies' tearoom and franchised successful etiquette classes to the wealthy children of Boston's North Shore. But what Eva will be remembered for is her un-

canny ability to read lace. People come from all over the world to be read by Eva, and she can tell your past, present, and future pretty accurately just by holding the lace in front of you and squinting her eyes.

In one form or another, all the Whitney women are readers. My twin sister, Lyndley, said she couldn't read lace, but I never believed her. The last time we tried, she saw the same thing I saw in the pattern, and what we saw that night led her to the choices that eventually killed her. When Lyndley died, I resolved never to look at a piece of lace again.

This is one of the only things Eva and I have ever vehemently disagreed about. "It wasn't that the lace was wrong," she always insisted. "It was the reader's interpretation that failed." I know that's supposed to make me feel better. Eva never says anything to intentionally hurt. But Lyndley and I interpreted the lace the same way that night, and though our choices might have been different, nothing that Eva says can ever bring my sister back.

After Lyndley's death, I had to get out of Salem and ended up in California, which was as far as I could go without falling off the end of the earth. I know that Eva wants me to come home to Salem. It's for my own good, she says. But I can't bring myself to do it.

Just recently, when I had my hysterectomy, Eva sent me her lace pillow, the one she uses to make the lace. It was delivered to the hospital.

"What is it?" my nurse asked, holding it up, staring at the bobbins and the piece of lace, a work in progress, still attached to it. "Some kind of pillow?"

"It's a lace maker's pillow," I said. "For making Ipswich lace."

She regarded me blankly. I could tell she had no idea what to say. It didn't look like any pillow she had ever seen. And what the hell was Ipswich lace?

"Try holding it against your sutures if you have to cough or sneeze," she finally said. "That's what we use pillows for around here."

I felt around until I found the secret pocket hidden in the pillow. I slipped my fingers in, looking for a note. Nothing.

I know that Eva hopes I will start reading lace again. She believes that lace reading is a God-given gift, and that we are required to honor such gifts.

I imagine the note she might have written: *"Of those to whom much is given, much is expected–Luke 12:48."* She used to quote that bit of Scripture as proof.

I can read lace, and I can read minds, though it isn't something I try to do; it is something that just happens sometimes. My mother can do both, but over the years May has become a practical woman who believes that knowing what is in people's minds or their futures is not always in anyone's best interest. This is probably the only point upon which my mother and I have ever agreed.

When I left the hospital, I stole the pillowcase off one of their pillows. The Hollywood Presbyterian label was double stamped on both sides. I stuffed Eva's lace pillow inside, hiding the threads, the lace, and the bonelike bobbins that were swinging like tiny Poe pendulums.

If there was a future for me, and I was not altogether certain there was, I wasn't going to risk reading it in the lace.

Each Reader must choose a piece of lace. It is hers for life. It might be a pattern handed down through the generations or a piece chosen by the Reader for its beauty and familiarity. Many Readers prefer the handmade laces, particularly those of old Ipswich or the laces made today by the women of Yellow Dog Island.

—THE LACE READER'S GUIDE



Chapter 2

When the phone call comes in, I am dreaming of water. Not the warm blues and greens of the California beach towns where I live now, but the dark New England Atlantic of my youth. In my dream I am swimming to the moon. Like all dreams, it seems logical. The idea that there is no pathway between sea and moon never occurs.

I swim my own combination: part breaststroke, part drownproofing: slow and purposeful, a rhythm remembered from another lifetime. The movement is all efficiency, with just nose, ears, and eyes protruding above the water, mouth submerged. With each forward stroke, tiny waves of salt enter my open mouth, then recede again as I slow, mirroring the larger surrounding ocean.

I swim for a long time. Past Salem Harbor and the swells. Past any sight of land at all. I swim until the sea becomes still and clear, too calm to be any real ocean. The light from the full dream-moon

etches a clear path on the black water, a road to follow. There is no sound save my own breath, slow and steady as I swim.

This was once my sister's dream. Now it is only mine.

The rhythm of movement gives way to a sound rhythm as the telephone rings again and then again. This is one of the only phones that actually rings anymore, and part of the reason I agreed to take this house-sitting job. It is the kind of phone we might have had on our island. That's the one interesting thing about what has happened to me. I am encouraged to rewrite my own history. In the history I am writing, May actually has a phone.

My therapist, Dr. Fukuhara, is a Jungian. She believes in symbols and shadows. As do I. But my therapy has stopped for the time being. *We have come to an impasse,* was the way Dr. Fukuhara put it. I laughed when she said it. Not because it was funny but because it was the kind of cliché that my Aunt Eva would use.

On the fourth ring, the answering machine picks up. The machine is old also, not as old as the phone, but the kind where you can screen calls and hear a little bit of the message before you decide whether it's worth it to actually speak to a live person.

My brother's voice sounds tinny and too loud.

I stretch to pick up, pulling the surgery stitches that are still inside me, the ones that haven't yet dissolved.

"What?" I say.

"I'm sorry to wake you," Beezer says.

I remember falling asleep on this couch last night, too tired to get up, hypnotized by the smell of night-blooming jasmine and the sound of Santana playing over the hill at the Greek.

"I'm sorry," he says again. "I wouldn't have called you, but . . ."

"But May's in trouble again." It's the only time Beezer ever calls these days. At last count, May has been arrested six times in her ef-

forts to help abuse victims. Recently my brother informed me that he'd put the number of the local bail bondsman on his speed dial.

"It's not May," he says.

My throat tightens.

"It's Eva."

Dead, I'm thinking. *Oh, my God, Eva is dead.*

"She's missing, Towner."

Missing. The word has no meaning. "Missing" is the last word I expected to hear.

Palm fronds clatter against the open window. It's already way too hot. Clear Santa Ana sky, earthquake weather. I reach up to pull the window shut. The cat runs scratches across my legs as it lunges for the freedom of the canyon, leaping through the window as it slams, catching just a few tail hairs, the last trace of what was here just moments ago and is now gone, that fast. Immediately the cat scratches on my legs begin to welt.

"Towner?"

"Yeah?"

"I think you'd better come home."

"Yeah," I say, "yeah, okay."

It is called Ipswich lace, or bobbin lace, or bone lace. It is made on bolster pillows held on the laps of the women. The pillows are round or elliptical and most resemble the muffs that Victorian women later carried to keep their hands warm while riding in their carriages. Each woman makes her own pillow, and those pillows are as individual as the women themselves. In old Ipswich the pillows were pieced together from bits of fabric, then stuffed with beach grass.

—THE LACE READER'S GUIDE



Chapter 3

THE *SALEM NEWS* HAS ALREADY picked up the story about Eva's disappearance: "Elderly Woman Missing Ten Days" and "Lace Reader of Salem Vanishes." Eva used to send me the Salem paper. It was around the time that May started making the headlines. For a while I actually read them. My mother's clashes with the police over her tactics for saving abused women were becoming famous and made for good copy. Eventually I stopped reading the papers and would leave them on the porch in their wrappers until my landlord would get fed up and take them to Santa Monica for recycling or, if it was winter, roll them up tightly and burn them in her fireplace like logs.

The paper speculates that Eva just wandered away. A woman interviewed from the Salem Council on Aging suggests tagging the

elderly residents of Salem. It evokes an interesting image—cops with ear tags and tranquilizer guns rounding up old people. Realizing she's gone too far with her suggestion, the woman goes on to say: "This kind of thing happens all the time. Salem is a small city. I'm sure she couldn't have gotten far."

The woman clearly didn't know my aunt.

The ferry from Boston lets me off on Derby Street, a few blocks from the House of the Seven Gables, where Nathaniel Hawthorne's cousin grew up. I am named after Hawthorne's wife, Sophia Peabody, although the spelling is different; my name is spelled Sophya. I was brought up to believe that Ms. Peabody was a distant relative, but I found out from Eva that we weren't related to the Peabodys at all, that May simply found Sophia interesting, and appropriated her as our own. (So now you see which side of the family the lying thing comes from.) By the time it would have bothered me, May and I were hardly speaking anyway. I had already moved in with Aunt Eva. I had changed my name to Towner and wouldn't answer to anything else. So it didn't matter all that much.

I'm walking for a long time. The estrogen patch on my arm begins to itch. I have a rash from it, but I don't know what to do about that, short of ripping the damned thing off. I figure the rash is probably from the heat. I'd forgotten how hot it can get in New England in the summer, and how humid. Ahead of me tourists swarm. Buses line the lot at the Gables, jamming the side streets. People move in groups, snapping photos, stuffing souvenirs into bags that are already far too full.

Around every corner of Salem lurks a history lesson. Dead ahead as I walk is the Custom House with its gold roof. This is where Hawthorne worked his day job, an appointed position as clerk. Using the locals as subject matter, revealing their secrets,

Hawthorne basically wrote his way out of this town, escaping west to Concord before the townspeople remembered their talent with the old tar and feathers. Still, now they celebrate Hawthorne as their own. The same way they celebrate the witches, who never existed at all in the days of the witch trials but who thrive here in great numbers now.

A kid steps in front of me, asking directions to the common. There are three kids actually, two girls and a boy. All in black. *Goths,* is my first thought, but no, definitely young witches. What gives it away finally is the BLESSED BE T-shirt worn by one of the girls.

I point. "Follow the yellow brick road," I say. Actually it's a tour line painted on the street, and it's red, not yellow, but they get the idea. A man in a huge Frankenstein head walks by, handing out flyers. I want to call for the continuity person, but this isn't a movie set. A cruiser slows, the cop looks at the kids, then at me. The boy spots the witch logo on the side of the police car, gives the cop a big thumbs-up. Frankenstein hands each of us a Freaky Tours flyer and sneezes inside his big hollow head. "Universal tours without the budget" is what Beezer calls this place. I heard from my brother that Salem is trying to shed its image as Witch City. He told me last year that they were attempting to pass an ordinance to limit the number of haunted houses that can be erected within one city block. From the look of things, the ordinance didn't pass.

The second girl, the shorter of the two, grabs the side of her head, pulling it slowly until her neck cracks. Celtic-knot tattoo on the nape of her neck, hair way too dark for her pale skin. "Come on, let's go," she says to the guy, and grabs his arm, leading him away from me. "Thanks," he says. Our eyes meet, and he flashes a quick smile. She steps between us then, turning him wide like a big ship she's trying to keep on course. I follow them, walking in the same direc-

tion toward Eva's house but leaving a safe distance so she won't think I'm after him.

It's a long walk toward the common. I hear the music before I see the crowd—it's nature music, New Age. We could be back in Woodstock except for the preponderance of black clothing. I'm wondering what holiday it is, what Pagan celebration. I count the days and realize that it's some kind of summer-solstice thing, though it's about a week too late. Living in L.A. has made me forget the seasons. Here the arrival of summer is something for everyone to celebrate, Pagan or not.

Salem Common, with its huge oaks and maples and the Gothic cast-iron fence, triggers a lost school memory. There used to be tunnels under the common, sometime after the witches but before the Revolution. The shipping merchants probably used the tunnels to hide trade bounty from their English tax collectors; that was the theory anyway. After the war for independence finally started, the tunnels were used by the privateers, who were the same thing as pirates, really, but with the government's permission. Not England's permission—it was the British ships they were stealing—but permission of the new government. I'm told they also hid ammunition there, and saltpeter. Beezer and I used to search for the tunnels when we were little, but Eva told us that they're all filled in now.

I turn the corner by the Hawthorne Hotel and see the low blue flame from the old glassed-in popcorn machine, which is still on the corner across from the hotel, as it has been every year since my mother was a little girl. There's also a makeshift stand selling wands and crystals, but that's new. Across the street stands the imposing statue of Roger Conant, who, after failing to realize his original goal in Cape Ann, ended up founding the city that would become Salem. I'm reminded of the cliché Eva used to repeat at least ten times a week: *There are no accidents.* And the one that inevitably followed. *Everything happens for a reason.*