

SHOW ME
BETRAYAL



SHOW ME MYSTERIES – BOOK ONE

ELLEN E. WITHERS



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All characters are fictional, and any resemblance to real people, either factual or historical, is purely coincidental.

For my family and a Heavenly tripecta of fantastic women: My mother, Ruth Gorrell Erdel, who nurtured my love for reading; My Aunt Juanita Ulrich Erdel, who became my mother figure when mine passed too soon; and Louise Pruitt Withers, my former mother-in-law, turned “mother-in-love,” who seemed to adore every word I wrote.

Chapter One



Liesl

November 1

Liesl raced across the porch steps of the grand Victorian dwelling, through the house, and up the stairs.

What happened? Aunt Suzanne was fine, but now she might not make it?

At the doorway of her great-aunt's bedroom, she gathered courage around her like a cloak and stepped into the room.

"Hello there."

Aunt Suzanne's frail body was small and pale against the cream-colored sheets. Her gray hair hung loose around her narrow, oval face. If she'd heard Liesl, she gave no sign.

Liesl felt gut-punched by her aunt's drastic decline.

Crossing the polished hardwood floor, she dropped her purse on a nearby chair—no need for medical training. One glance hinted at Aunt Suzanne's dire condition. She should be in a hospital bed, not her own bed. Aunt Suzanne's cheek felt

afire against her kiss. With a soft caress, Liesl smoothed her mussed hair. Still no movement. She hadn't considered the possibility of life without her aunt in her twenty-seven years. She dropped onto the chair next to the bed and silently prayed for a miracle.

God, this wonderful woman means everything to me. Must you take her so soon?

"Hello, Liesl."

She jumped at the unexpected greeting.

Patricia Sizemore, Aunt Suzanne's friend, rose from a chaise longue in the far corner of the bedroom and moved toward Liesl. She offered no handshake or hug. Her usual rigid personality had not softened, even under these circumstances.

"Mrs. Sizemore." Liesl ran her fingers through her hair. She must look hideous to the prim and proper woman before her. "Thank you for being here."

Mrs. Sizemore tried to straighten her navy pantsuit, but the wrinkles remained, likely the result of a long vigil at Aunt Suzanne's bedside. It was the first time Liesl had seen her look less than perfect. This morning, dark circles framed her cool, blue eyes hooded by puffy lids. Her mouth, sans lipstick, twisted from a grimace into a slight smile.

"We weren't expecting you so quickly," Mrs. Sizemore said.

Liesl shrugged. "After Doreen's call last night, I threw clothes in a bag and drove all night. How is she?"

The two turned toward Aunt Suzanne.

"No better." Mrs. Sizemore spoke in a low voice. "Before she left, Doreen called Dr. Johnson again. He'll be here any moment."

"This was so sudden."

"Yes, she was fine at the Butterfly House board meeting three days ago."

"I appreciate you and Doreen taking care of her." Liesl

turned and noticed her bloodshot eyes. “Would you like to go home and rest?”

Mrs. Sizemore shook her head. “No, dear. You might need help.”

“Thank you.” Liesl returned to the chair beside the bed.

When Mrs. Sizemore left the room a few minutes later, Aunt Suzanne’s eyes fluttered open.

“Liesl ... sweet Liesl,” she whispered.

Liesl blinked back tears, leaned down, and repeated her kiss. “You got sick, so I thought I’d come for a visit.”

Aunt Suzanne’s lips forced a smile, and her liver-spotted hand burrowed out from under the covers. Liesl held it against her cheek and felt the warmth of her aunt’s gnarled fingers. These fingers had bandaged her skinned knees and squeezed her hand in reassurance when she’d lacked faith.

“Don’t worry. I’m here to take care of you.” Liesl gave her hand a little squeeze with the hope her aunt would have the strength to fight her illness. *Stay with me. Have courage.*

“So good to see you,” Aunt Suzanne said. Her voice seemed raspy. “Love you to the moon and back.”

“Love you to the stars, Aunt Suzanne.”

They smiled at the affectionate phrases they’d always exchanged.

After a moment, the old woman’s smile faded. “You must find my book.”

“You mean *my* book?” Liesl had published several romance novels. “You want one of my books?”

Aunt Suzanne’s brow furrowed, and she shook her head.

What book was she talking about?

Her lips moved, and Liesl leaned closer.

“Must ... stop the killer,” Aunt Suzanne said.

“Did you say killer?” Liesl squeaked her response with astonishment.

“Yes ... who killed Winnie ... all there ... in my book.”

Aunt Suzanne couldn't be talking about Liesl's books. Hers were romances, not murder mysteries. “Where is this book?”

After a moment, Aunt Suzanne blinked her watery green eyes. “Don't trust anyone who was there.”

“Where?”

Was she hallucinating? With all the medicine on the table beside her aunt, had something caused her to be confused?

After a deep breath, Aunt Suzanne continued. “Everyone there was ... is dangerous.”

Liesl squeezed her hand again. “Don't worry. Everything will be fine.”

Her aunt mumbled incomprehensibly and closed her eyes. Her breathing grew steady and slow in sleep.

* * *

At the large picture window in the entryway, Liesl paused and inhaled. The faint smell of old wood permeated the room. How she loved this house and the woman who owned it. Aunt Suzanne was so ill. She'd always assumed the iron-spirited woman would outlive her. The tears she resisted earlier spilled.

Footsteps on the front porch caught her attention. She hurried to open the door before the bell could disturb Aunt Suzanne's sleep.

Dr. Johnson, a tall man wrapped in a heavy wool coat and leather gloves, smiled his welcome. He stepped forward and encircled Liesl in a bear hug. “I figured you'd be here when I finished my hospital rounds.”

She stepped back and brushed the tears from her cheeks. “Thank you for coming. I know you don't do house calls.”

“Nonsense. For your aunt, I'll do anything. You know she was my first patient.”

She took his coat and gloves. “Really?”

“I knew her as a boy. She volunteered at a Boys and Girls Club. Encouraged me to ‘do big things.’ When I returned here to practice medicine in 1998, I figured the citizens wouldn’t accept a doctor from the wrong side of town.” Liesl followed Dr. Johnson upstairs as he continued. “But on the first day of my practice, Suzanne marched in and welcomed me. Her attitude helped attract other patients.”

“She’s done so much good.” Liesl bit her lower lip. “What’s wrong with her?”

“Likely some type of flu. Doreen called, stating her symptoms were nausea, diarrhea, and general weakness, but no fever. She’s had all the recommended vaccines, but they don’t protect against all strains. Let’s go check and see if I need to admit her to the hospital.”

“She looks terrible.”

“I’ll be that judge.” He turned and crossed the hallway.

“I’ll be right back. Just want to grab my suitcase.”

* * *

Outside, the air was crisp. A soaring pine filled the early November air with its wintry tang. Liesl’s boots crunched through the light frost in the shaded areas of grass.

The garage was once a carriage house. In the 1920s or 1930s, the owners redesigned it to suit automobiles. The wooden double doors weighed a ton. Aunt Suzanne’s handling them nearly every day offered proof of her strength, even at age seventy-nine.

Her aunt’s white Cadillac hugged the right wall and left plenty of room for Liesl’s Jeep to park in its former place. After unloading her suitcase and laptop, she turned toward the house and paused, taking in its grandeur. This two-story

Ellen E. Withers

architectural treasure was a hundred and thirty years old, yet it stood majestically in well-kept condition. She loved the colorful gingerbread at the eaves, the wrap-around porch spanning half the house, and the turret that rose from the northeast corner.

Liesl was lucky to have grown up here in Mexico, Missouri, in this house that influenced her writing. Her first published manuscript, a historical romance set in the Victorian era, featured a similar house. Aunt Suzanne had replaced the slate roof and added two bathrooms and modern conveniences to the kitchen. Little else had changed since her aunt's grandfather built it.

A faint siren blared in the distance. Liesl glanced up to Aunt Suzanne's second-story window. Mrs. Sizemore rapped on the glass, beckoning her to return. The siren roared as flashing lights filled Liesl's peripheral vision.

Heart pounding, she scrambled up the porch steps. Dr. Johnson must have sent for an ambulance.

No. I can't lose her.