

A PLAGUE AMONG US by Deb Pines

EXCERPT

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Mimi and Sylvia were on the road again, heading to the Tissue Donor Center in Jamestown to chase Winston Suarez.

The center wasn't far from the Loves' funeral home. But this time Google Maps was directing them to take the highway, not back roads.

They started out the same way, heading west on 394, passing the same early landmarks: the Institution's empty parking lots, busy golf course and We Wan Chu Cottages.

"So what's new?" Sylvia asked.

"Too much," Mimi said. "It's crazy how I keep learning stuff without seeing how any of it means anything."

"Because the medical examiner still hasn't called?"

"Uh-huh."

Sylvia sighed heavily. "Maybe he's just as difficult as his dad."

Tom Love Sr., in Mimi's opinion, wasn't difficult. All he had done was stand up for his son before Sylvia picked a fight with him. But Mimi let it go.

"Well, one thing I'll grant the older one," Sylvia said.

"What?"

"He's above average in the looks department."

Mimi chuckled.

"What?"

"I thought you're done with all of that nonsense."

"I am."

Sylvia moved to the left lane to take the ramp onto Route 17/Interstate-86 East and floored it.

"Whoa, hey," Mimi said. "Mario Andretti, slow down."

“*Okay, okay,*” Sylvia said. “Just had to get us on the highway.”

Sylvia slowed down to fit into the slow lane, sticking behind a FedEx truck going a steady 70 miles an hour.

Mimi filled Sylvia in on what she had heard from Shannon about Liam and Patrick. Their denials of knowing anything about the pranks. Their claims the decisions to have no autopsy and a quick cremation were just expedient—so Patrick could get home.

“So what time does Winston Suarez get off work?”

“I’m pretty sure it’s 5.”

Mimi had reached Winston once, described why she was calling. He got quiet, then hung up. After that, she called Winston and never reached him—leaving something like five or six messages.

They stayed on the highway about ten miles before taking the Jamestown airport exit, then winding around a maze of city streets until signs with a big “H” led them to the UPMC Hospital campus.

“Hopefully,” Sylvia said, “we’re more irresistible in person.”

The Tissue Donor Center was one of many outbuildings with medical-sounding names surrounding the redbrick main hospital.

Some were done in their own architectural style. Most, like the Tissue Donor Center, imitated the low-slung, redbrick design of the hospital, down to having a white number (for their address) and a primary-colored letter on their sides.

The letters were explained on campus signs. Building A was the main hospital. Building B, the signs said, was Outpatient Svcs. C was the Sherman Medical Bldg. D was Imaging & Medical Bldg. E was Physical Therapy, Pharmacies. F was the Tissue Donor Cntr.

Sylvia zipped past the early letters of the alphabet, slowing at F, the Tissue Donor Cntr. The main door had its name above it, an intercom to the right. Near the curb, another sign said, “No Standing any time. Ambulance Lane.”

They didn’t see any ambulances, but Sylvia decided to wait for Mimi anyway in a parking lot across the street.

“Break a leg,” Sylvia yelled as Mimi got out.

Mimi laughed.

If she did break a leg, no question, this was the place to do it. Her limb could be X-rayed at the Imaging Bldg.(D) and then set at Outpatient Svcs. (B).

At the door of the Tissue Donor Center, Mimi knocked.

“Who is it?”

The woman’s voice, through the intercom, was familiar.

“My name is Mimi Goldman,” Mimi said. “And—”

“Let me guess? You’re looking for Winston?”

Mimi laughed. “I guess I’m pretty predictable. Is he here?”

“He is. This is Hannah, by the way. We keep speaking on the phone. Why don’t I see if he’ll come out?”

Mimi had high hopes. How hard would it be for Winston to take a few steps to walk outside and see her?

On the other hand, blowing her off might be easier.

When she heard a ping, Mimi examined her phone. Sylvia, after coaching from her grandkids, texted like a teenager.

Wassup?

I asked for WS and someone said they’d get him. Just waiting.

kk

Standing there, Mimi went through her email. Then she switched to her latest word game addiction: Spelling Bee in *The New York Times*.

Players have to make the most words, four letters or longer, from seven given letters, including one letter that had to be used in every word. The words that day had to be made from BLWCHAE, with all using an E.

Mimi started with the obvious ones: BLEACH, BLECH, BEACH, EACH, LEACH, LECH. She was moving on to trickier words when the center’s door swung open.

Out stepped a tall, handsome, dark-featured young man in a white surgical mask and blue scrubs with the name SUAREZ above his shirt pocket.

“I don’t know who you are,” he said. “I don’t know why you keep asking me about this case, but . . . I’m pleading with you to drop it and just go.”

Mimi had expected an asshole, too lazy or too self-important to talk. Not a frightened young man.

“Can you say why?” she asked. “I have no idea why this case is at all sensitive.”

Winston shook his head.

“How about off the record? You have my word that I’d never tell anyone you ever spoke to me.”

“Sorry,” he said. “I can’t risk losing my job.”