

When librarian Claire Murray is forced to curate a major donation to her college, she must deal with a disgruntled ghost, the possibility of love and the chance to reclaim her past to define her future.

No Gifts, Please
By Bridget Shanahan

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Chapter 1

Afternoon sun slanting through the windows hit the diamond at the perfect angle, creating a dazzling, handheld special effect. She blinked at the pinwheel of colors and a diffuse sparkle gloved the hand of the young man offering her the ring. It was a classic solitaire, set high in white gold. Maybe two carats? It was simple, elegant and Claire had no idea why it materialized a foot from her face.

After a moment, she tuned into the soundtrack to this spectacle. The young man who was talking to her had presented another prop for her consideration, *The House of Mirth*, by Edith Wharton. He placed it on her desk and carefully deposited the ring on top of it. So she was not entering a romance, but a mystery.

“I was checking this book out and it is not one of ours. This isn’t in our system. Never has been. I was thinking a tag slipped into the sleeve of the plastic book jacket. I thought I felt something in the spine and after I poked at it, the ring popped out.

People steal books from libraries, but they rarely deposit their own books on the shelves. As head librarian at Knabb College, “other duties as required” did not extend to lost and found administration. However, excavating diamonds from the stacks was not typical, either.

“I’ll talk to Janine. We don’t have a protocol for this. I’ll lock up the ring until we figure out what to do with it.” Her ring-bearer seemed relieved he didn’t have to deal with this any further, which might involve paperwork, or worse, meetings.

“What about the book?” he asked.

“I’ll keep it for now. Maybe Janine will want to put it out for the next book sale.”

After he returned to the checkout desk, Claire wrapped the ring in a tissue and locked it up in her desk. She turned her attention to the book, which she read in high school. It was about a young woman,

unlucky in love and finance, who killed herself. Or maybe it was an accident? She was hazy on the details.

It seemed likely this copy of *House of Mirth* and the ring shared an owner. No inscriptions or bookplates. When she riffled the pages, her eyes snagged on an unexpected patch of yellow. One little line caught in headlights.

It posed a question Claire never asked herself. She had invested prudently in her life and her steady routine rewarded her with a comfortable predictability. At least until recently. Admittedly, living in Florida skewed the curve of normalcy.

But there was the question confronting her: “Why must a girl pay so dearly for her least escape from routine?”

Chapter 2

What is appropriate attire for a ceremonial crossing of Lake Monroe in a swan boat? Ed Gillespie had no idea. A business suit would be absurd and the Florida sun would laminate him in it after 10 minutes. A polo and khakis seemed too casual. Ed took his social cues from the prospect, but Etta Turner delighted in eccentricity. For all he knew, she would show up decked out as Cleopatra. Or in a bikini. He considered a striped t-shirt but put it aside because he looked like a rogue gondolier. The most innocuous thing in his closet was a white button-down he paired with dark pants. He considered adding a Knabb College necktie, but tossed it in the backseat of his car at the last minute.

Etta had opted for a demure get-up, by her standards. She met him on the south shore in a pale blue linen dress and pricey leather ballet slippers. Her diamond watch was worth more than his fully loaded Volvo. She carried an umbrella. She seemed eager to get out there, come hell, high water or gators. The wind was kicking up, but not cooling off, like a broken air conditioner. It was as quaint as an afternoon of punting on the Thames, but in a punishing climate with 300-pound prehistoric reptiles ready to capsized you and tuck you away for a midnight snack.

The sky was showing creases that suggested late afternoon rain. If a storm was gathering, alligators would start burrowing into the mud. Ed often thought the words on the Florida State Seal should be “Hunker Down” rather than “In God We Trust.” Or given recent shifts in weather patterns, they should just go with “Last Call.”

He nodded to the student standing by the swan boat, dispatched by the ever-reliable SVP of Operations, Sidney Randolph. Ed was the only person allowed to take the swan boat out other than Sidney himself. The swan boat was Sidney’s pride and joy, not because it was

a high-performance watercraft, but because it was an authentic piece of Disneyana.

The vessels were named for their graceful swan figureheads. They were larger than the pedal boats with a swan design you saw on the lake in downtown Orlando, seating 26 passengers on benches against the walls. Natural gas engines with electric guidance systems powered the original swan boats, but this redesigned version was a water propulsion craft so maneuverable it could practically perform water ballet, swiveling 360 degrees.

Ed turned his attention back to Etta. As a philanthropy pro, he had an eye for the telling detail that meant you could score an estate gift versus a onetime scholarship donation. At their first meeting, he identified Etta as Old Florida money. In the greater Orlando metro area, that means she pre-dated the theme park execs from the '80s. Occasionally on Interstate 4, you still spotted a car that bore witness to their invasion, with a bumper sticker promising "The 21st Century Begins in October" or "We don't care how you did it in California."

Etta was born with a contrarian spirit and a sturdy and shapely body holding up well even as she neared her 80s. She had used her natural gifts wisely, catching the eye of a well-connected banker when she was an 18-year-old mermaid at Weeki Wachee. She performed acrobatics 100 feet below the surface at the bottom of the spring. Like her sister mermaids, she was strong, graceful, and rigorously trained as a certified diver. The landlocked banker was instantly lovelorn, captivated by her spangled tail.

Herbert Turner was no match for his wife's wit or daring, but he made up for it with 50 years of unwavering devotion and a well-stuffed portfolio. His investments left Etta as wealthy as the pro athletes who lived in her exclusive neighborhood, the Great Walled City of Isleworth.

Some donors came bearing egos that demanded constant feeding. Etta was more trickster than tyrant. She liked to mess with you. She was by far Ed's favorite among what Knabb's president B. Gary Harlow called "significant benefactors and friends of the college."

And so, VP of Advancement Ed Gillespie crossed Lake Monroe, under a merciless sun, delivering the erstwhile star of a roadside attraction, to a donor appreciation event his staff dubbed "The Snore on the Shore."

Claire Murray wrenched her head to look out the window. Although most of the wall of the upper floor of the library was glass, its gridded design required improvised yoga to get a clear view of Lake Monroe and the dedication ceremony. She watched the wind whipping at the crimson and gold streamers wrapping the bright white pillars of the new gazebo. A cluster of visitors stared out at the water. From her observation deck at Shermer Library, the shiny baldness of the donors' heads reminded her of a clutch of eggs. She was not a reliable chronicler of bald spots because she was only 5'4", assuming good posture and a little back-combing. On the rare occasion when she wore heels, she discovered gleaming patches of scalp she had never suspected.

She knew the college's swan boat was making its way to the shore, but she couldn't determine who was at the helm. Probably Ed Gillespie. The higher-ups in philanthropy kept the bountiful bonded to them in the interest of job security. Relationships are their currency. What a hellish job, she thought.

The new gazebo was pleasant enough. It would make for beauty shots in recruiting materials and provide a place for stretching and water breaks for the runners along the lake's paved trail. Roving packs swept past her when she was pulling into the lot. Claire enjoyed

spotting them in the heavy mist of mornings when she would only catch rhythmic flashes of pumping elbows and knees. She wasn't a runner, but she wandered down to the lake for lunch on the handful of Florida afternoons that were not marked by melting heat or Wrath of God thunderstorms. She was careful to stay well back from the swans who nested near Lake Monroe. They were ferociously territorial and their attacks delivered a nasty shock to people whose frame of reference was Swan Lake.

Even clueless northerners had the good sense to fear Albie, an albino alligator. He was one of the lake's long-term residents, between 10 and 12 feet long, depending on whom you asked. She considered the gator, named after the FSU mascot, Albert, as their low-rent Loch Ness Monster. People enjoyed trying to catch sight of him, but some insisted he was an urban legend.

Still... a gazebo? She didn't envy Ed Gillespie his responsibility to romance donors. She wondered how much influence he had on them. Why not get people to donate something practical? She thought of the scanners and high-speed printers on the library's wish list. There was also a constantly under-stocked campus food pantry. She stopped by every few weeks to drop off her buy-one-get-one-free jars of crunchy peanut butter from Publix. Not an impressive gift, but at least she was getting protein into kids, so they did not live entirely on caffeine and microwave burritos.

The swan boat was docking and she saw Ed Gillespie offering his arm to a small, but by no means frail, old lady. It struck her as a courtly gesture. She could not hear them, but she could see the campus a cappella group, Swan Song, step forward. The quartet charmed her in her first months at Knabb College, but they soon proved annoyingly ubiquitous, performing their limited repertoire at every excuse. After almost five years, she tuned them out. At one point, she tried to explain the unsuitability of their name, but they were also deaf to her. The

derivation of "swan song" is the belief that swans are mute but break into spectacular song at the moment of death. It might add a theatrical touch if the quartet collapsed as the last note of the last song in the program sounded, but that had yet to happen.

President B. Gary Harlow gripped a microphone in a slick hand. He hated these events. In fact, he hated events involving donors, alumni, faculty, staff, or students. Outdoor venues were his worst-case scenario. There was no way to maintain your dignity when you are squinting, sweating and squirming under humidity that wrapped around you like an ugly Christmas sweater. He thought about the costumed Disney characters that had "minders" assigned to them as they roamed the park, lest a beloved duck or mouse keel over in front of kids. He did not trust any of his team to catch him if he fell.

As he thanked Swan Song, his microphone cut out. Amateur Night in Dixie! He wasn't sure where that phrase came from, but it was frequently part of the voice-over narration in his head. When he was a provost back at Denison, at least these obligatory appearances came off professionally. Almost two years into his presidency, he accepted that Floridians were impervious to formality, decorum and standards in general. The swamp may be paved, but the natives would never be truly civilized and that was how they liked it.

He glanced at the bullet points printed on the 5"x7" card he palmed. Arial. 18-point, just as he instructed. Joy Broderick, his VP of Communications, provided bland pleasantries for meet and greets and quotes to the press when comment was unavoidable. She kept Knabb's name out of the papers and the Chairman of the Board of Trustees (and his business and political interests) prominently featured in puff pieces.

President Harlow squeezed a small, tight smile onto his face, like the last of the toothpaste. Etta Turner stood nearby, ready for veneration. Ed Gillespie wielded an umbrella to shield her from the late afternoon glare. The Philanthropy team shifted in an uneasy half-circle, resenting their command performance on the baking lawn. A few curious students stopped to determine if this event included free food. Functioning mic in hand, Harlow thanked Etta Turner for her generosity. He pointed out the beauty of the campus and segued smoothly to Knabb's commitment to providing an enriching environment that supports student success.

He was winding up his remarks when he caught sight of the Provost, Buddy Dyson, and the Chair, Ali Khatib, ambling down to the gathering, chuckling together. They were late and making their customary show of an utter lack of courtesy. Or respect for him. He knew that behind his back, they referred to him as “Resident Harlow.”

He felt a surge of... what? GERD? Something pumped acid into his chest and throat, like a corrosive gargle, and he fought the urge to cough because he wasn't sure what might happen if he did. Here was his nemesis. Or since there were two of them, always in league, nemeses, plural? He hated them the way he hated country music, televangelists and his daughter's slack-jawed boyfriend.

Prompted by as wild an impulse as he ever allowed himself, B. Gary Harlow went off-script. He slipped a hand into his pocket and fingered the rock that was his talisman. His father gave it to him when he was a boy. The piece of flint was a little bit of his history, a piece of his home in Ohio, and something that could become a tool... or a weapon. It made him feel safe.

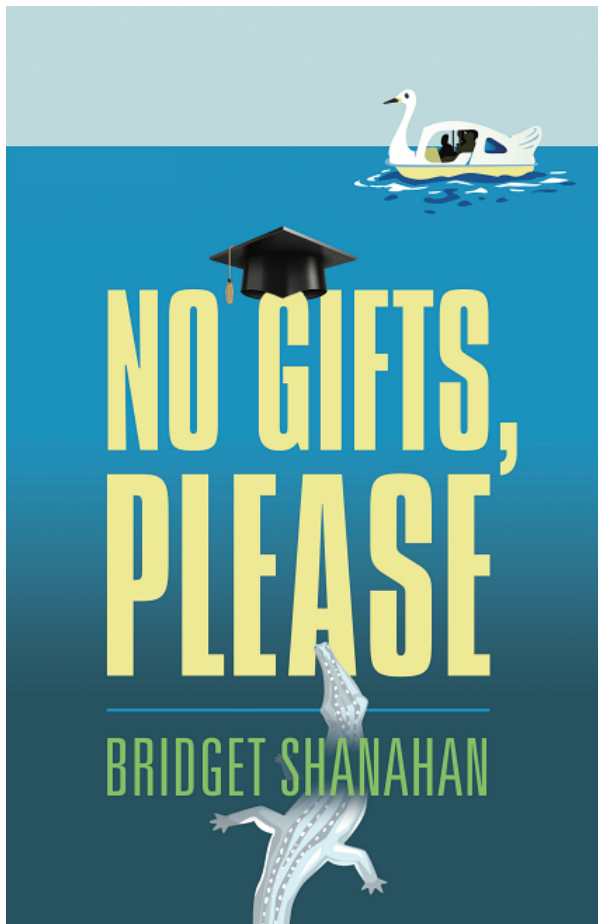
“In higher ed, we refer to the quiet phase of a fundraising campaign. Gathered as we are today, as closest friends, we can break our silence. I want to tell you about what comes next for Knabb College. We are on the cusp of something transformative. We will

establish a new center of excellence that will make us a nexus for innovation.”

A few people clapped politely, assuming a nexus was something good. At the college, people joked that not only did President Harlow lack any vision for the college, he lacked a personality. His speech wasn't exactly a barn-burner, but today, at least, he seemed to have a point.

About the Author

Bridget Shanahan is a Taurus, on the cusp and in denial. She started her writing career drafting wastewater treatment plant operations manuals. She later held a secret clearance, which should make you nervous. She has lived in Central Florida for most of her life, however she still tells people she is from Ohio. This is her first novel and fifth published book.



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