

THE  
BITTER END  
BIRDING  
SOCIETY



*a novel*

AMANDA COX

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BIRDING  
SOCIETY**



**AMANDA COX**



*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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# Prologue



AUGUST 1959

Viola Chambers had always wondered at what point in the dying process a person understood they weren't long for this world, and now she'd give anything to unlearn it. The newborn nestled in her arms squirmed and stretched. Tiny fingers escaped the swaddle and gripped hers. The strength in that tiny hand exceeded her own.

Though it was a struggle, Viola shifted her body to look into those fathomless newborn eyes. That scrunched, pink face. A tiny auburn curl rested on the baby's forehead. Just like her father's hair.

Viola memorized her daughter's features, hoping for evidence that a piece of herself would outlive the next few days.

Her baby girl yawned.

A shadow loomed over her, and it took everything in her to lift her chin. She blinked, trying to focus her eyes on her husband. When had the head on her shoulders grown to such a weight? Trilby shifted her pillows, helping her into a more comfortable position.

The sorrow and fear in her husband's face confirmed what she already knew but no one had had the guts to tell her.

Trilby leaned forward. “Let me take her, Vi. You need your rest. You’ve got to get your strength up so you can raise this little spitfire.” The lie came out low and graveled.

She attempted a smile, trying to play along, but the corners of her lips drooped like peony blooms after a rainstorm. “Not yet,” she croaked.

Illness had reduced her song sparrow voice to that of an old woman.

Poor Trilby had lost his father eight months prior. And now he’d lose his young wife.

She’d stay if she could.

But she couldn’t.

She’d seen that truth in her doctor’s solemn face. Her nurses’ pity. Trilby’s trembling hands. Her soul repeated the same refrain. What had once been fierce and full of fight inside her chest was light and wispy, as if it was liable to float away like down feathers on the wind.

But her mind screamed otherwise. That this could not be the end of her story. That she could not, would not, be leaving her fragile, broken husband alone to raise their child.

Who would be left to guide him through the fog of pain? Who would help him remember the vibrant seminary student he’d once been?

With her failing voice, she beseeched the man in front of her—the reticent foundry worker who ceased to speak the name of the God he loved. “Pray for me.”

Several aching, empty moments throbbed in her ears.

“I’ll have the chaplain come by,” he said, unable to meet her eye, as if he believed he no longer possessed the wherewithal to bend God’s ear. Not even for his dying wife.

Her tiny, unnamed girl squirmed in her arms and grunted. Needing. Wanting.

But Viola had nothing left to offer.

The grunts turned to whimpers, then wails.

Trilby stared at their daughter as if she was a copperhead poised to strike and not his own flesh and blood. *Lord, help him.* Maybe he had no heart left to pray for her, but she had enough faith for them both.

“I’ll call for the nurse,” he said, and then he was gone from her sight.

Her daughter’s cries rent Viola’s heart in two. She’d give anything for the strength to sway by the window and sing a lullaby, letting the light of day kiss their faces. To bring solace to discomfort.

“When peace like a river attendeth my way. When sorrows like sea billows roll,” she rasped out the words, inaudible now beneath the baby’s hunger cries. Breathless, she paused the deathbed dirge of her favorite hymn and wished for the sweet tones of Trilby’s mountain dulcimer to lift her threadbare spirits. It seemed a lifetime since she’d last heard him play.

Images of her mother and then of her little sister, Cora, flashed in her mind. Her mother’s visage lonely. Cora’s, angry and abandoned. How she wished she could tell them she was sorry. For what, she wasn’t entirely sure. It wasn’t marrying Trilby she regretted. But she sure wished things could have turned out different.

That her father wouldn’t have excommunicated her from the family for marrying the preacher’s son.

That her father wouldn’t have resorted to taking a life to solve his problems.

If nothing else, she wished she could have kept her promise to her sister.

She had more wishes than she had breath.

She only hoped when Cora got the news of Viola’s passing that she wouldn’t be flooded with guilt or blame or bitterness. But that she’d remember playing hide-and-seek in the cottonwood trees. Walking to school with her little hand hidden in Viola’s. Cora was ten years her junior, but she was her very best friend. Forever and always.

After everything that happened, did Cora still feel the same?

A nurse clad in white appeared. Viola's nameless daughter cried while the nurse pattered to and fro, checking vitals and making indications on her chart. Did the woman not notice her baby's cries? She was the one who needed attention. Not Viola.

The nurse and Trilby made some sort of silent exchange, but only Trilby's face was in her view. The color drained from all but the freckles that dusted his nose and cheeks, making them stand out in stark relief.

The nurse leaned over Viola to scoop up her crying child. With the last ounce of strength, Viola grasped the woman's arm, causing her to pause. Somehow the nurse must have understood.

She lifted the squalling babe closer to Viola's face. Viola inhaled the scent of her daughter and pressed her parched lips to the velvet cheek. "I'll love you forever," she whispered.

The baby turned her head toward the touch, open mouth searching.

The nurse swept out of the room to supply the child with sustenance Viola ached to provide but could not.

Trilby pulled a chair close and held her hand. How she missed the playful curiosity that danced in his eyes when they'd first met. Would this man have what it took to give their daughter the love she needed? Would he ever find it in himself to rise from the pit of grief he'd fallen into after his father's murder?

He had to. There was no other choice. She squeezed his hand, hoping her frail grip said all the words she lacked the strength for.

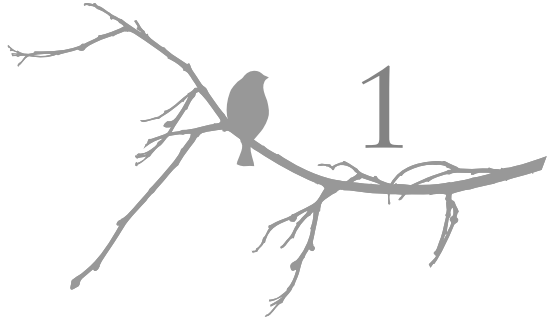
"Viola, I have to tell you something." His hollowed-out voice made her failing heart constrict. "It wasn't Wayne who killed my father."

She blinked hard, fighting to stay conscious. Fighting to make sense of the words Trilby spoke. Her father had confessed to that crime. Would rot in prison for it.

He took a shuddering breath.

"Who?" she ground out, though in that moment she knew.

The answer lived in a pair of haunted hazel eyes.



### SIXTY-SIX YEARS LATER

Ana Leigh Watkins was a hero, at least according to the plaque she buried in the cardboard box full of teaching supplies. The entire time she packed up her kindergarten classroom, she'd let it air out on her desk, wrestling with the discomfort of such a title.

It was the same undeserved designation the news outlets had assigned her eight months ago, but somehow it seemed harder to escape when it was etched in brass.

Was it really heroism when you acted on sheer instinct?

A core memory she'd carried with her from her own elementary days was one of the few things that had kept her sane over the past several months. Those many years ago, the motivational speaker had stood on the stage in the school auditorium, framed by ugly mauve velvet curtains, and told the eager ears of Pearson Elementary that bravery wasn't the absence of fear. It was about being afraid and doing the thing anyway.

Now her community touted her as a hero for a single moment of instinctual action. Self-preservation or self-sacrifice? She was never quite sure. Emotion and thought hadn't had time to register. But later, in her million-and-one mental replays, she'd seen a truth she didn't want to own. She'd escalated a situation that could have been avoided.

A hero? She scoffed. That word fit about as well as young David in King Saul's armor.

She taped the cardboard box closed and stacked it with the others. Her summer away with her aunt Cora would be the prologue to a brand-new chapter in her life. It had to be.

Someone tapped on her open door and her heart froze in her chest. Her fellow kindergarten teacher Lexi stood in the doorway. Ana let out a breath as her heart resumed its normal function.

Lexi offered her a sympathetic smile that was almost Ana's undoing.

"I'm fine," she said before her friend could ask.

A corner of Lexi's mouth twitched. "Of course you are." She looked past her to the stacks of boxes. "Looks like you've made good progress. Can I help?"

Ana stepped to the side. "I'm finished, but I could use a hand carrying these to my car."

Ana had met Lexi seven years ago when they'd both started out as newly minted teachers at Ridgeford Christian Academy. They'd become fast friends. This past year had solidified that friendship. With Lexi, she didn't feel the pressure to pretend. Maybe because Lexi understood that it could have just as easily been her class the intruder walked into that day.

After all the boxes were loaded, Ana gave one last look over the room. Bare without all its charts and artwork. It still had that new carpet smell. After the "incident"—the sanitized word she used to refer to that early fall day—they'd had to replace it. They'd painted too, though she could never figure out why. As if changing the wall color from drab beige to a cheery light blue could make the kids forget.

Many people said God saved their little school the day that troubled nineteen-year-old came looking for violence. Others gave all the credit to Ana. Some said it was a mixture of both, calling Ana God's instrument.

Ana just wished her face had never found its way onto the local

TV stations and was relieved when the news cycle moved on to other people's tragedies.

As soon as the doctor had given her clearance, Ana had hobbled back into her classroom, determined to be an example to her students. To give them a living and breathing example of resilience. Together they could fight back the darkness by showing up every day and learning.

What a fool she'd been, thinking she could help those kids navigate the traumatic beginning to their school careers—a teacher with a bad knee and frail faith who was scarred by just as much trauma as they were. She shut and locked the door behind her, still unsure if she'd ever have the courage to force herself back into that room to face a new crop of beautifully naive and unscathed five-year-olds.

Lexi waited at the car. "You're still planning on staying over tonight, right? Before you embark on your big adventure?"

"Yeah. Thanks for letting me store my stuff in your basement for the summer."

Lexi stared at the school grounds. "But is it really just for the summer?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out, Lex."



Ana parked in front of the colonial-style house Lexi had inherited on the outskirts of Ridgeford. Her friend helped her empty the car and stack the boxes into the corner she'd set aside for Ana.

Once they emerged from the basement, Lexi trudged to the living room and sank onto the couch. "You're really sure this is what you need?"

Ana sat down beside her. "I probably need decades of therapy, but I can't fit that into one summer. I'm settling for a few months in a place where no one except my aunt knows my name. A restart."

Lexi snickered, then lifted her hand in apology. "I'm sorry I

laughed, but you have to admit how funny that sounds. Going to a place called Bitter End for a fresh start?”

Ana scrunched her nose. “No doubt about it, the place has a pretty unfortunate name.”

Lexi absently braided her long dark hair. “Seriously, call me if you ever figure out the story behind that. I’m fascinated.”

Ana collapsed into the sea of throw pillows lining the back of the couch and wiggled her shoulders until she was fully ensconced. “It will be good for me to be somewhere where I can just be me. Where no one stops me at the supermarket and says, ‘Hey, aren’t you the teacher who . . .’” Ana massaged her temples. People meant well, but she was just so tired of being recognized by people who knew nothing at all about her.

Her aunt had called two months ago, asking if Ana might be willing to come for the summer to help prep her house to be sold. The timing was positively providential.

Her phone dinged, and Ana shifted to work it free from her pocket. *Mom*. She tucked her bottom lip between her teeth as she read the message.

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Come home. Stay with us for the summer. The guest room is all made up.

Guilt stabbed in her gut as she typed her reply.

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I wish I could. But I promised.

Her thumb hovered over the send button. She released a sigh and sent the message.

Lexi cleared her throat and raised an eyebrow.

“Mom doesn’t understand why I want to spend the summer with Cora instead of with her.” Ana grabbed a throw pillow and hugged it to her chest. “She means well, but I can’t handle someone hovering and starting endless conversations about what happened. I want to go where no one knows.”

Lexi put her hand on Ana’s shoulder. “I hear you, but don’t

stuff this mess down. You spent this entire year taking care of your students. It's past time to put yourself first. Find *you* again."

"That's what I'm trying to do, Lex. I promise." She pulled her gaze away before the ache in her friend's eyes could quite reach Ana's heart. "Aunt Cora will be good company. It will be nice getting to know her better." And to hopefully learn a little more about her family history. All Ana had grown up knowing about her mother's side of the family was that her mother's parents had died when her mother was young, leaving her to be raised by her stepmother. Ana discovered her mother's aunt, Cora, while digging around an ancestry website for a college project. "We've kept in touch for a few years now. I met her in person once."

Lexi raised an eyebrow again. "And now you're off to spend a whole summer together?"

"It will be fun." Ana could tell her friend was just as convinced as Ana sounded.

Lexi slid off her sneakers and pulled one knee up under her chin. "I'm going to miss you, my friend. Who else is going to listen to my saga of trying to date in your thirties in this weird world?"

Ana chuckled. "We'll still have the phone for that. Please continue to keep me posted on the dates your mother sets you up on."

Lexi shuddered in mock horror. "Nobody is going to be worse than the last one. Nose Hair Ned was a new low."

Ana busted out in laughter. "You've got to stop nicknaming them. My heart can't take it."

"Halitosis Hank. BO Bobby. Apron Strings Aaron." Lexi ticked off the list on her fingers.

Ana snorted. "What was the deal with Apron Strings?"

Lexi shook her head, glee still alight in her eyes. "He was the one who couldn't stop talking about his mom and all that she did for him. She'd even picked out the clothes he was wearing that night. I'm surprised she didn't tag along so she could tell him if I was an acceptable option or not."

“Oh, dear.” There might be a lot of proverbial fish in the sea, but from Lexi’s perspective, most of them had gone belly-up.

Lexi stood suddenly. “It’s our last night before you’re out of here. That calls for girl dinner.”

“Girl dinner?” A slow grin overtook Ana’s face.

She couldn’t remember the last time they’d raided the cabinets on a Friday night to assemble random food, then kicked back and traded stories of kindergarten antics, administrative woes, and encounters with high-strung parents. Their weekly tradition had been lost over this harrowing year.

“Let me see what I’ve got in here.” Lexi disappeared into the kitchen, and the noise of opening and closing cabinets filled the air.

Moments later, her friend popped back around the corner and held a firestarter log out to her. “You get the fire going, and I’ll make up our charcuterie board.” When Ana took the log, Lexi pumped her fist into the air. “Girl dinner!”

Ana raised the kindling in salute, catching a spark of her friend’s energy. An energy they once shared. Ordinarily this reminder of the person Ana had been before the incident would have caused her to dive inward and grieve the loss. But not tonight. She refused to allow it.

Before long she had a modest blaze going in the firepit and Lexi joined her with a board piled high with a wild assortment—everything from brie and pancetta to goldfish crackers and gummy fruit snacks. Two cups of sweet tea were also precariously balanced on the board. The woman should join the circus.

They snacked and traded celebrity gossip. Something Ana never cared much about, but after the incident had participated in, joining Lexi’s obsession. It was nice talking about people whose biggest problem was deciding which publicity stunt would get them the most traction.

“It’s summer!” Lexi cupped her hands around her mouth and let out a jarring whoop. Then she grinned. “Ah. That felt good. Your turn.”

Ana let out a half-hearted “woohoo.”

Lexi nudged her. “Uh-uh. You wouldn’t have let one of your students get away with that puny effort. I’m calling the real Ana Leigh Watkins out of hiding.”

Ana sighed and gave her friend a weary glare. At one time, she’d had the reputation as the fun teacher. The one who could coax the most reserved class into being engaged through her made-up songs and dances. But she’d lost the capacity for silly.

“Stand up and let’s do it together.” Lexi cajoled until Ana complied.

“One, two, three!” She and Lexi simultaneously sucked in a breath, but the sound that filled the air was Ana’s solitary squawky yelp. She smacked her friend on the shoulder.

“You jerk,” she said as both dissolved into hysterical laughter.

About that time, Lexi’s neighbor, an elderly woman whose favorite hobby was peering out her window, peeped over the privacy fence, wide-eyed, and then ducked down when her gaze collided with Ana’s.

Gasping from laughter, Lexi said, “Miss Busybody is gonna be telling the whole neighborhood that there’s something other than sweet tea in our red plastic cups.” Then she threw an arm around Ana, squeezing her tight. “You’re going to be all right, kid. We both will. New women by summer’s end. I’m sure of it.”

Ana really wanted to believe her.



## FEBRUARY 1958

“Cora, I’ll leave you if you don’t hurry up,” Viola whispered through the door to her little sister, who was still lingering in their shared bedroom, looking for her aggie shooter.

“I’m comin’, Vi. Hold yer horses.”

She took a deep breath, trying for patience. After all, Cora was ten years her junior. It only made sense that things like lost marbles should weigh so heavy on her mind. “If we don’t get out of here before Daddy’s back from the stills, you know he won’t let us go.”

Neither dared to speak above a whisper even though Momma was out back milking the cow and there was no one to overhear.

They’d never directly disobeyed their father’s directive before. The harshness in his tone when Viola had mentioned the new family moving to Old Buck Mountain Road was as fresh on her mind as the milk Momma coaxed from their Jersey cow.

“Stay away from them,” he’d said, knuckles white on the edge of the supper table. “I’ll not have my daughters mixing with that ilk.”

But it was too late for that.

It had been too late the first time Viola caught sight of the family standing outside that dilapidated church. A man and woman with bright, hopeful faces. A girl about Cora’s age. And a boy.

A tall and lean boy with auburn hair. Dressed in slacks and a crisp white shirt. He was older than her. But he couldn't have been *that* much older. There was something in the way he'd carried himself, so different from the other mountain boys. Different from the men too.

Cora came out of the room, holding up her marble between her thumb and forefinger. "Found it. Let's go."

Viola's gaze shot to her sister's feet. "Not until you put on some shoes to hide those grimy little toes."

Cora shook her head. "No way. I'm not going if I gotta wear shoes."

"Then stay. I'm not taking you into that church barefoot."

Cora rolled her eyes skyward. "You act like we're walking into that Sistine Chapel in Momma's encyclopedia. Ain't nobody gonna notice my toes in that run-down place."

"Fine. Stay here. Maybe someone else will take up with the new girl and play her in marbles."

Cora's cocky attitude faltered. Her scamp of a sister had designs on the newcomer. For some reason, Cora had dreamed up that this girl had a whole cache of beautiful marbles and no idea how to play. She was convinced she'd snooker her out of the lot of them.

Cora scurried back to their room. Thumps and bumps of things being tossed about came through the walls. Viola sighed. So much for being discreet.

Cora stomped out of the room, limping a little. "These dang thangs are too small."

"First of all, don't say dang. Second, nobody is forcing you to come," Viola said as she walked to the front door of their log cabin. Cora clomped behind her. That girl would follow her to the end of the earth, even in too-tight saddle shoes.

Just as they reached the front door, it swung open. Momma stepped inside, a pail of milk gripped in her slim, strong hands.

Her eyes flicked over their pressed dresses and shoes, her lips pursed.

“Momma, please.” Viola clasped her hands in front of her chest.

Momma’s gaze traveled to the mantel where the family Bible rested.

“Please,” she whispered again.

Momma set the full pail on the wood floor, shoulders slumped, looking more tired than Viola had ever seen her. “Go on, then. But be smart about it. I’ll not defend you if you’re caught, and you won’t bring my name into it if you are. Do you understand?”

Viola restrained the joy attempting to light her face and gave a solemn nod. “Yes, ma’am.”

Momma leveled a glare at Cora. She cleared her throat. “Lil bit?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Cora piped up.

The girls hurried past her, making sure not to let the screen door slap in the frame. They ran down the road, getting out of earshot quick as possible in case Momma thought better of aiding their duplicity. Once they reached the bridge that crossed Mouse Tail Branch, they slowed. Viola paused a minute and straightened her hair and dress and then she helped her sister do the same. They continued down the road at a more sedate pace.

“You reckon this ole preacher will stick around longer than the last ’un?” Cora swiped at her nose. It had started to run a little in the morning chill.

Viola handed her a checkered hankie. “At least pretend to be civilized, Cora Leigh. Surely you can manage the act for an hour or two.”

Her sister stuck out her tongue and blew her nose with a loud honk. “Why’d that last preacher man leave again?”

“Idle gossip I ought not be getting into with a little kid.” Truth was, Viola was as clueless about the whole ordeal as Cora. But a few of their older cousins who’d quit school to join in on the family business said they’d seen the preacher out with the other men, passing the jug instead of preaching. And she’d once heard Daddy

bragging to Momma how he'd converted the preacher instead of the other way 'round. She couldn't understand Momma's reply, but it hadn't been happy.

Momma was a God-fearing woman.

Daddy said that he believed in God but wasn't "skeerd" of nobody.

They rounded the bend and then took a narrow trail that cut across Mr. Beavers's land, which bordered the church.

The dingy clapboard structure in desperate need of a fresh coat of paint came into view. Viola's heart thumped in her chest. This had been a mistake. It was all well and good sneaking out of the house, but how would she ever explain if one of their neighbors mentioned they'd been there?

She tugged her sister to a stop. "We'd better not."

Cora shot her a withering glare. "You stuff me into this ugly dress—and *shoes*," she said it like donning footwear was something blasphemous, "and you're gonna chicken out now? No way."

Cora ran ahead, and Viola had no choice but to follow, because one thing Daddy always said was to stick by her little sister come hell or high water. She'd always thought that was an awful funny thing to say since they lived on a mountaintop where high water was never a concern.

One thing was certain though, he'd consider it a greater sin to lose sight of her sister than to set foot in that church on a Sunday morning.

Cora's hand was on the front door before Viola could stop her. And then they were inside. Light streamed through the freshly washed windows. Gone were the liquor bottles and the stench of stale cigarettes that had littered the floor before. In its place was a fresh lemon scent. The pews had been straightened into a handful of tidy rows.

The place was near-about empty though. The preacher sat on the front row. A few rows back sat old Widow Calloway, the apothecary of the hills. The woman had so many tinctures and

concoctions on hand that the children on the mountain told stories about her being a witch instead of a healer. But there she sat in the third row, prim, eyes fixed ahead. The boy sat on the raised platform, his little sister beside him. Each had a mountain dulcimer across their lap. Their mother stood next to the pair in a light-blue shirtdress.

The boy's eyes met hers, and he smiled, a faint blush coloring his freckled cheeks. Viola ducked her chin as he struck the first note, high and clear, filling what had been an empty room.

The mother began to sing, her voice sweet and strong.

The preacher stood and lifted his hands to the heavens as his wife and children sang about flying away someday. Cora was clapping along, thankfully matching the rhythm and not creating her own. Even Viola's toes couldn't resist tapping against the scuffed floor as the spirited song flowed through her heart.

From the joyful notes of "I'll Fly Away," the boy seamlessly transitioned to the slower, more soulful tune of "Amazing Grace."

Viola's heart swelled to bursting. Partly from the beauty of the music. Partly from the feeling in the room. So alive, joyful, full of hope. And if she was honest, a little because of the shy glances the boy kept shooting her way. His eyes were framed by thick lashes that matched the deep auburn hair curling slightly around his ears.

The hymn concluded, and the preacher traded places with his wife and children.

"Good morning. My name is Reverend Quincy Chambers. It is my joy to serve the community of Bitter End and to open God's Word with His people this morning. Let us pray."

Viola ducked her head and tried to pay attention to the preacher's words to the Lord, but her mind wandered to her fidgeting sister. Cora's knee bounced so that the heel of her saddle shoe clacked on the hardwood. Viola elbowed her a little harder than she'd intended, and a yelp squeaked out of her, echoing in the chapel. Viola sank lower in the pew.

When the preacher said amen, Viola lifted her chin, face as hot

as lard sizzling in a frying pan. Reverend Chambers looked their direction, mirth creasing the corners of his eyes. “If you have your Bible, open to 1 Peter 5:8.”

Empty-handed, they watched the preacher turn his pages until he reached the one he sought. “And the Word of the Lord says, ‘Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.’”

Be sober? Viola sank even lower in the polished pew. Was that an accusation? Did the man realize that before him sat the only children of Wild Wayne Lee Whitt—moonshining monopolist of this mountain?