A BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

# The Chart

*The Meridian Files, Book One · A.R. Hollowell*

## ABOUT THE BOOK

Rachel Adler chose the memory-care facility with the 4.5-star rating and the lobby that smelled like eucalyptus. Then she visited at night. One aide covers the whole unit, call lights blink with no one coming, and her mother's chart says she is doing well. Rachel starts counting the hours no one watches, and Cora, the night aide who has walked that hallway alone, has been keeping a notebook of her own.

## THEMES TO TALK ABOUT

Institutional neglect · The document versus the truth · A daughter keeping watch

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

35 questions in 7 parts. Choose the ones that spark your group, or work through them in order.

### *First Impressions*

01 Helen walks into the lobby on her first day and says, "The flowers are fake." What did you notice in the opening chapter that Rachel's months of research could not show her?

02 When Rachel mentions the 4.5-star rating, Helen answers, "Stars are for children." Why do you think Rachel needed that number so badly?

03 On the first Sunday, Helen says, "At night it's different. There's only one," and the staff call it sundowning. Why is it so easy to dismiss a true statement from someone with dementia?

04 Rachel's first night visit turns on something ordinary: her mother is thirsty and the pitcher is empty. Why does such a small thing undo a trust that months of research had built?

05 That night Helen tells her, “I asked, but nobody came.” Why does such a simple sentence carry so much weight?

## *Helen*

06 Helen’s own chapters take us inside a mind that can no longer explain itself, still counting the seconds between a call and an answer. How did those chapters change the way you saw her?

07 Helen did her crosswords in blue ink “because pencils were for people who expected to be wrong,” and she knows good coffee when she smells it. Why do opinions this small matter so much in a story about neglect?

08 After her move to Room 31, the family photograph sits six inches beyond the reach of Helen’s hand. Why does such a short distance feel so large?

09 When Helen says “No” to the pill and turns her head away, the chart records agitation. What happens to a person when her refusals are written down as symptoms?

10 When Rachel finally brings the dark roast, Helen says, “That’s the good kind,” and for a moment she is entirely herself. Why does a moment that cannot change the outcome still matter?

## *Cora*

11 After she finds Mrs. Kowalski on the floor, Cora buys a composition notebook and starts a record of her own. What does it take for a worker to begin writing down what her employer’s chart leaves out?

12 Cora quietly pulls Helen’s nightstand close enough for her hand to find the photograph, and she never records it anywhere. Why do you think that kindness stays off every page?

13 Joseph’s call light goes on at 2:14, and Cora reaches him at 2:47 after the other rooms that needed her first. Could she have done anything differently, or had the staffing already decided for her?

14 Before she puts her name on the complaint, Cora sits down with her mother, Gloria, and tells her she needs the facility Gloria will someday live in to be better. Why does she need Gloria’s blessing?

15 Cora’s notebook and Rachel’s spreadsheet arrive at nearly the same response time: “10.75 and 11.” Why did it matter that they began as separate witnesses instead of friends?

## *Lena, Greg, and the People in Charge*

16 Lena Park knows Joseph was found on the floor and types “Patient was in bed.” She tells herself she is keeping Meridian open for residents who would have nowhere else to go. Does her reason change how you judge her?

17 From Columbus, Greg Harmon answers Lena’s fourth staffing request with “Please ensure all documentation is consistent with facility protocols.” Is the man who never walks the hallway more responsible than the woman who falsified the report, or less?

18 Rachel tells Lena, “Three refusals make a pattern. Four make a policy.” Did Lena’s decision to forward the emails and write that fourth request change your view of her?

19 Helen is moved from Room 22 to Room 31 for “care optimization” in forty-eight hours, but moving her back takes nearly two months. What does that difference tell you about how institutions act?

20 Warren Hale flagged Meridian three times in three years, and each flag disappeared into a filing cabinet. Is a warning that changes nothing still worth filing?

## *Choices With No Right Answer*

21 Rachel opens Joseph’s hospital record through her job, knowing it is a privacy violation with her name on the access log. Was she right to do it?

22 After the night Helen set off the smoke alarm “making tea,” the house was sold to pay for Meridian. Was placing Helen there a betrayal, a necessity, or both?

23 Cora’s job supports Gloria, and coming forward could cost her everything. How long would you have waited before putting your name on the evidence?

24 Mara Osei refuses to take Rachel’s folder on faith and insists on verifying every claim, even while Helen stays in Room 31. Was her caution right, given what time was costing?

25 Ben helps from Denver with money and phone calls, and he keeps repeating the rating. What does the novel say about the sibling who lives far away, and was Rachel fair to him?

26 David visited his father for fourteen months and accepted the word peaceful when Joseph died. Have you, or someone you know, ever trusted a reassuring report you later wished you had questioned?

## *The Ending*

27 Helen dies on a Thursday, the night before her approved move back to Wing A, with an agency aide who does not know her on duty. Why do you think the story lets the rescue arrive one day too late?

28 Helen's death certificate gives the same cause as Joseph's, complications of Alzheimer's disease, and Rachel calls the sentence "accurate, complete, and a lie." How can a record be all three at once?

29 The fine is fifty thousand dollars, less than the eighty-eight thousand a year Helen paid to live there, and the staffing does not change. What would real accountability have looked like to you?

30 Rachel tells fourteen-year-old Lily everything, leaving her "The knowing. The refusal to trust the chart." Is that inheritance a gift, a burden, or both?

31 Helen's chair stays pulled out from the kitchen table, because a chair pushed all the way in does not expect anyone back. What does that empty chair mean to you?

32 The book ends with Gloria's call: Cora is dead, officially of an overdose, and Rachel thinks, "Cora did not use. Cora counted." What do you believe happened, and how did that last line change the book for you?

## *Beyond the Book*

33 Rachel's advice to the next family is "Visit at night. Count the call lights. Fill the pitcher yourself. Do not trust the chart." Is it fair to ask families to watch for what they are paying an institution to do?

34 Have you, or someone you know, faced a care decision like Rachel's? What question would you now ask on a facility tour?

35 The title names a document instead of a person. Whose story do you think the chart in this book really tells?

### IDEAS FOR YOUR MEETING

- Build a list together: each member shares one question they would now ask on a care-facility tour, and the group collects the list for anyone facing that choice.
- Hold a short debate: one side argues that Lena is the villain of the story, the other argues it is Greg Harmon and the chain behind him.
- Rewrite one scene together: tell Rachel's first night visit from Cora's side of the hallway, and talk about what each woman could and could not see.

- Brew a pot of strong dark roast, “the good kind,” and start the meeting the way Helen started every morning.

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