

Finding Hope

A Thesis Submitted to
The Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

By

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April 30, 2023

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all military spouses. You live a life that is often without recognition, but you are essential to the fabric of our society. You give your all and serve alongside your spouses with honor. Thank you.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank Prof. Timothy Shea for his keen insight and guidance during the thesis process. He offered direction when it was necessary and guided me toward completion. His outlook on literature and authors is appreciated.

I would also like to thank Prof. Anna Anderson. She molded my writing through her insightful comments and encouragement. She set the bar high for what an instructor should resemble. I am forever grateful for her kind leadership.

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Artist Statement:

For many years I lived as a supportive and devoted military spouse. Many times, this role required that I put my needs secondary to that of the United States military. I left family that would have supported me as I had young children. I stopped pursuing my degree and a career to be there solely for my family because of my husband's chaotic work schedule. I left behind friends. There was not always someone there to pat me on the back and say, "Good job. Thanks for your sacrifice." However, there was comradery and support from within the military community that kept me feeling appreciated, at least most of the time. I experienced circumstances and relationships that were solely due to being a military spouse. The challenges and setbacks were tempered by the unique experiences that living from duty station to duty station brought to my family and me.

The utmost respect for military spouses and all they endure, even to the point of losing their spouses, inspires me to write and tell their stories. They are the often-neglected, unsung heroes of the military. Their contributions to the country often go unseen and overlooked by society. Spouses have given birth without their significant others. They have dealt with health emergencies without their spouses. They have had to buy and sell houses on their own. Their stories, even fictionalized, should be told. It is my desire that their strength and determination be found in the pages of my story. With this perspective, I began to think of my story, *Finding Hope*.

My story began as a random piece of writing that I thought merited being part of a larger work. The plot was born out of a series of three books for middle readers that I have outlined, the Leaving Home series, which will connect both adult and middle readers to the world of the military family. This series will follow the teen years of Andi Scott, a young teen when the

stories begin. The first book will be about her desire to be the captain of the track team, just as she learns that her brother has Type 1 Diabetes and her father gets orders to move out of state. The second book deals with bullying, as Andi has primarily grown up in the Midwest and doesn't fit in with the edgy and trendy Seattle area aesthetic. And the last will be the story of her father's last deployment and his subsequent death from an IED. These stories and my thesis novel are linked through the grief support group introduced in *Finding Hope*.

A young military spouse, Hope Diaz, has just learned that her husband was killed in a sniper attack while deployed overseas. After learning this, she is ill almost every day. Hope has a difficult relationship with her mother that progresses throughout the story. Her mother encourages her to find a grief support group.

Hope's mentor, Regan Scott, is the mother of the protagonist in my Leaving Home series, whose father dies in the last book. Regan encourages Hope to continue to live her life. Stacy, Hope's neighbor, accuses her husband of having an affair. As part of her military death benefits, she is allowed to continue to live on base for a year, but she must decide what to do when this period ends. Her salary as a part-time baker doesn't afford much in the high-rent Seattle area. Hope discovers that she is pregnant but quickly loses the baby.

An opportunity arises to work in England with a professional baker that Hope has admired for his work with pastries. With her mom's and Regan's encouragement, she moves overseas to start over. Hope finds herself thrust into a new culture and new job. She finds an apartment in a converted barn; her neighbors become the family that she needs. Amidst work mishaps, friendship struggles, and a mysterious man that she constantly encounters, Hope does learn to live and dream again.

This story is important in that it exemplifies the military spouse lifestyle of the modern age. Trials and challenges are inherent in life; however, those of the military spouse are uniquely taxing. According to an article by Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness, “military spouses are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed” (8). “Of the active-duty military spouses who are employed, only 56% are employed in their area of education or training, and 32% are working part-time” (Ibid). I left pursuing my degree shortly after we married when we moved overseas. When we came back to the U.S., I decided to stay home with my three girls because of lack of support/family and my husband’s work schedule after 9/11. Hope experiences this underemployment working part-time in a bakery. She relies heavily on her husband’s income and housing benefits to afford to live in the expensive Seattle area.

While her family is from the area, she chose a flexible job that both aligned with her interests and her husband’s hectic work schedule rather than pursuing a full-time career. Military spouses often do this as it is difficult to transfer credentials or licenses to different states or countries after a move. The average military family is expected to move every three years, with moves more often as the military member achieves higher rank. With these factors in consideration, Hope must find a way to support herself now that her husband has died.

I cannot refer to my story without addressing faith and religion. Hope does not come from a family of faith in God, but when she begins attending a grief group, she encounters women of faith. The faith and support of her mentor have an encouraging effect on Hope as she walks her grief journey. In this context, I desire for my story to be like that of Madeleine L’Engle’s middle-grade novel *A Ring of Endless Light*. This novel had a profound impact on me as I was growing up. Faith was spoken of as a matter of course, without being trite or preachy. It led me to memorize my first Bible verses because the protagonist recited the scripture during a

difficult time. The characters in this novel were real people grappling with the death of a beloved family member. Faith was woven throughout the story as the source of hope.

I have long desired to write about faith in a practical yet inspiring manner in a story that offers the truth of the Bible. The closest I have encountered this style of writing in adult fiction is through the works of Susan Meissner, especially in *A Fall of Marigolds*. She offers faith as an explanation for life's circumstances. In an interview, she perfectly articulates the way that I would like faith to be seen in my writing. She says,

I think any worldview an author has, especially if it shapes her thinking, the way she lives her life, the choices she makes, etc., is going to show up in what she writes.

My worldview bleeds out of me in the pages of my novels as story, not as message, though. I never want my books to sound like sermons. What matters to me, like the virtues of love, sacrifice, forgiveness, affirmation, justice, does show up in my books, but in an as organic a fashion as I can pull off. That is my hope, anyway. The core of who I am is on the pages, but it's subtle. I think that is true of every novelist.

(Finck)

This style of writing appeals to me as a core writing philosophy. I want my faith to be evident in what I write but without proselytizing. I want faith to be lived out on the pages. Not told in canned dialogue that says, "You must accept Jesus as your savior to go to heaven." There should be an authentic story that creates a hunger in the readers for what they are reading to be evident

in their lives as well. I heard a lecturer at a writing conference say, “Write the book that you want to read.” Susan Meissner writes the books that I want to read.

I also have to acknowledge that the act of writing as a process includes Someone other than myself. Madeleine L’Engle, in *Walking on Water – Reflections on Faith and Art*, says, “An artist is a nourisher and a creator who knows that during the act of creation there is collaboration. We do not create alone” (L’Engle 43). In my best writing moments, I work in tandem with the Holy Spirit. The words flow, and a peace settles on me. These times are the pinnacle of the process. I have already outlined my story and written character sketches, so there is room to partner with God and allow sentence formation and word choices to come first through my spirit and then through my hands. It is this partnership that compels me to write.

There seems to be a dearth of books about military spouses in the mainstream publishing sphere. If you look for these novels on purpose, they can definitely be found; there does seem to be a sizable amount of these novels that are self-published. But there still remains a void in terms of volume. I want to offer the story of a military spouse as an opportunity for non-military readers better to understand some of the peculiarities of the military lifestyle, and I want military spouses to see themselves, or someone they know, in the pages of a novel. I accept that this genre may not appeal to the masses, but a well-written book should appeal to a large audience. Stories of tragedy and triumph are universal to humanity. While everyone may not live the haphazard life of the military, everyone has obstacles and setbacks of their own. Excellent writing is the crux of writing any book, but especially when there is a narrowing of focus. For example, I think of Frank Peretti’s novels, *This Present Darkness* and *Piercing the Darkness*. There is a narrow focus on spiritual warfare and the heavenly realms interacting with the earthly

realms from a Christian viewpoint. Up until these novels were written, there were not many fictionalized accounts of what spiritual warfare might look like. But the excellence of the writing and the mystical nature of the books helped their popularity. My plot may not be as enticing as Peretti's, but I aspire to write something of quality that will honor military spouses.

Finding Hope should explore the concept of faith in the process of hope and healing. In *Finding Hope*, Hope will wrestle with moving forward and knowing what to do. Will she stay in the area that she has grown up in or will she venture out into the world? Will she find faith like that of Regan, her grief mentor, and George, her new friend in England (yes, she moves abroad)? What standards will she set for herself going forward and beginning again?

I recently lost my father, and as I was comforting his friend, a specific Bible verse came to my lips. "Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope" (*New International Version*, 1 Thes 4.13). The concept of hope in the midst of grief is not limited to the Christian faith; however, our hope should look like something. Christian hope should be more than just an inspirational story that makes us feel good. Christian hope should point to Biblical truths. Just as the Biblical truths in *A Ring of Endless Light* compelled me to memorize scripture and aspire to write stories, I greatly desire for my writing to offer the reader something that is not abundantly available in today's literature: hope, integrity, and a strong moral compass.

The topic of grieving and death and hope and resurrection is universal to all cultures. There is a seat at the table for everyone to discuss this topic. From *My Sister's Keeper* by Jodi Picoult to *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak to *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, many novels address death and grief and life. But not all offer the perspective of redemption and eternal hope.

It is with this perspective that *Finding Hope* sits between atheism and New Age, between offering no hope for eternity and the concept that we are our own Gods. My faith compels me to speak the truth of the God that has overcome death. Perhaps there is room at the table for the story of a military spouse grieving her husband and searching for a new life as well.

I understand that there is a balancing act between my desire to write as Susan Meissner with my faith being organically woven into my story while at the same time honoring what God has done for all of us. It has been hammered into writers that we are to “show and not tell.” There is also a popular saying in the Christian community to “preach Jesus, and if you have to, use words.” My characters will have to act out the gospel on the page: living in humility, the truth of their circumstances, and knowing that there are no easy answers for grief and relationships, but holding on to a hope that does not disappoint (Rom 5.5). They must be as authentic as I can write them, creating empathy in the reader that leads to asking the hard questions of faith. “In art, either as creators or as participators, we are helped to remember some of the glorious things we have forgotten, and some of the terrible things we are asked to endure, we who are children of God by adoption and grace” (L’Engle 11). I want to create a space for faith in the beautiful *and* the hard things in my writing.

Critical Paper:

I endeavor to explore the idea of plot throughout the history of women's fiction. I have chosen a sampling of works from women authors representing common mindsets and ideologies during their writing. My work is in no way representative of all women's fiction but examines plot, plot devices, and plot themes. This exploration is from an artistic viewpoint, focusing on the nuances of plot and the author's reasons for writing as they did.

It has been said that there are seven basic plots from which all stories are told. Christopher Booker has examined this premise in his book *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*. The idea that all stories are basically one of seven intrigues me, although I will not be examining works to prove or disprove this premise. I will look at shades of plot that vary from author to author.

More general in terms of categories is the courtship and marriage plot in which a protagonist will find herself in the midst of searching for a husband. These stories generally end in a wedding and lend themselves to the happily-ever-after storyline. Along the path, she must overcome obstacles that keep her from her ultimate goal—marriage. I would be remiss if I did not look closely at the works of Jane Austen. For this study, I shall focus on two of her pieces, one from the beginning and one from the end of her career: *Sense and Sensibility* and *Persuasion*.

Jane Austen published *Sense and Sensibility* in 1811. As has been prevalent throughout literature, the main focus of the plot is the financial position of the main characters, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, as they discover love. They are left in poverty when their father dies, and their half-brother John inherits the family estate. They are forced to move from their home when

John's wife, Fanny, makes them feel unwelcome. They were of good social standing but without a dowry to recommend them to affluent, respectable men. The plot for *Sense and Sensibility* is not convoluted; it is well done.

Before leaving their home, Fanny's brother arrives. There is mutual admiration between Edward and Elinor, but Fanny disapproves and sends Edward away. When the Dashwoods arrive in their new home after moving, Marianne is courted by their neighbor Colonel Brandon. She is not inclined to respond because the Colonel is so much older. She instead falls in love with John Willoughby. However, he is not of good moral character and has impregnated the ward of Colonel Brandon. There is a reference to a duel between the two men that Austen "*seems to comment on the duel as needless*" (Thaler) through Elinor's dismissal of the duel. Willoughby leaves Marianne one day and turns up married to another woman another day in favor of her fortune after being disinherited by his wealthy aunt.

Meanwhile, Elinor feels the emptiness of life without Edward when he sends an atlas from their old home to Margaret, the youngest of the Dashwood sisters, instead of bringing it himself as he said he would. Upon a trip to London, it is learned that Edward has been secretly engaged to a young woman in their company, Lucy Steele. Edward's omission breaks Elinor's heart, but she remains stoic, which infuriates Marianne. Edward is disinherited permanently from his estate, which moved to his brother Robert. He ends the engagement with Lucy, unbeknownst to the Dashwoods.

Lucy ends up married to Robert, revealing herself to be materialistic and shallow. Marianne compliments Elinor on her reserve and allows Colonel Brandon into her heart. Marianne experiences the most significant transformation in the novel. After being questioned on whether or not she thought that her own behavior was as bad as Willoughby's, Marianne says to

Elinor, "No, I compare it with what it ought to have been; I compare it with yours" (Austen *Sense and Sensibility* 271). Marianne has grown in grace and composure, learning to curb her sensibilities with what is socially principled behavior.

Austen uses a simple romantic plot accompanying immaturity juxtaposed with maturity, or "sense," to demonstrate a deeper exposition of roles and cultural beliefs. First, there is Elinor and Marianne. Then there is Edward and Lucy, followed by Colonel Brandon and Willoughby. Edward is more staid in his behavior and remains faithful, both to Lucy and to Elinor, throughout the story. In contrast, Lucy is only devoted to her own ends. Colonel Brandon is the standard for model behavior toward all, remaining faithful even to a woman that betrayed him and remaining hopeful that Marianne will love him. He is unwavering in character. Just as there is an allusion to the duel between Brandon and Willoughby, there is a verbal duel between Elinor and Lucy when Lucy reveals her secret engagement to Elinor. Through her plot, Austen sets up opportunities for characters to rise to the occasion or to fail. She offers illustrations of both.

Jane Austen wrote *Sense and Sensibility* originally under a pseudonym, merely stating that it was written: "By a Lady." Her simple statement was to fight the established patriarchal publishing establishment during that time. She used this and the plot within to speak about society's injustices toward women and their ability to inherit or choose a spouse.

Written later in her career, published in 1817, "*Persuasion* is Jane Austen's last completed novel and at the same time the most psychologically developed" (Bystydzieńska). She weaves a plot that is mainly behind the scenes, seen through the eyes of the protagonist, Anne Elliot. Most of the story development is in Anne's ability to observe and overhear conversations, which leads to an internal examination of herself and those around her. Bystydzieńska says, "There is not much of a plot in this novel, not too many events take place, and much more

happens inside Anne's thoughts and heart. She has a vibrant inner life, and, as she has no reliable confidante, so we are able to learn about her inner life by observing her physiological reactions to some events." While I might disagree with her idea of the plot, I agree that most of Anne's growth is internally revealed.

Anne is the middle girl of three, with a conceited father and older sister, a silly younger sister, and a mother who has died. The story begins with the Elliot family needing to economize because of their out-of-control spending habits. Anne remembers when there was moderation in her home because of her mother's wise influence. The family decides, with the help of their solicitor and neighbor, Lady Russell, that rather than economizing, they will move to Bath and rent a home there while renting out their estate. A sea captain, Admiral Croft, and his wife have arranged to rent the home. Mrs. Croft has two brothers, one a curate and the other a sea captain, Captain Wentworth. Anne and Captain Wentworth had previously been in love, but Lady Russell convinced Anne not to accept him at the time, as he had no apparent prospects for wealth.

Before moving to Bath with her father and older sister, she visits her younger sister Mary at her home. All around her is chaos and discord, while Anne listens and tries to placate everyone: her sister, brother-in-law, his two sisters, and his parents. In the midst of this, Captain Wentworth is invited to visit. While Anne does not attend the first dinner, she does spend some time with him at the home of her in-laws. He treats her coolly with a hint of bitterness, only disclosed through a slight change of facial expression.

Throughout the novel, there are both physical and emotional obstacles to overcome before Anne and Captain Wentworth discover if they are still in love with each other. This point is where I disagree with Bystrydzieńska. They encounter other people that draw themselves away from each other. For Captain Wentworth, the distraction comes in the form of Louisa Musgrove,

Mary's (Anne's sister) sister-in-law. Louisa attaches herself to the very handsome and eligible bachelor, not knowing of their previous relationship. Louisa is outspoken and gregarious, commanding the attention of Wentworth through much of the story.

For Anne, Mr. Elliot, a distant relation that is to inherit the family estate, serves as a distraction. They both arrive in Bath after a brief passing of each other when Anne and her sister, along with the Musgroves and Captain Wentworth, go to Lyme. Mr. Elliot seeks to recommend himself to Anne, encouraged by Lady Russell, who wishes to see Anne suitably married. But Anne detects a façade put up by Mr. Elliot that she cannot break through, so she distrusts him. Indeed, Mr. Elliot is not so wholesome and only seeks to shore up his funds and reputation in society. He even takes Elizabeth Elliot's companion as a mistress with the thought of keeping her from marrying Sir Walter Elliot so that there will not be another heir to the estate.

Lady Russell plays an essential role in both persuading and dissuading Anne and her family toward various ends. Because she was the friend of Anne's mother, Anne allowed her influence to guide her. But while her persuasion of Anne was successful in the past by keeping Anne from marrying Captain Wentworth, Lady Russell does not succeed a second time. Anne grows in fortitude as she discovers who she is and what she wants. She becomes bolder in Lyme. "Anne, with her agency and determination, proves that she is definitely 'somebody' now, that she is an independent woman with her own opinions and she is ready to present her views to male listeners like Harville and Wentworth" (Ibid). Her values and her true feelings for Captain Wentworth become her guiding persuasion.

Both Anne and Captain Wentworth are freed from their distractions. Wentworth discovers his true lack of feelings for Louisa when she falls in Lyme and injures her head. She falls in love with another sea captain as she recovers. Wentworth is now free to think about

Anne. Anne is freed from the effects of Mr. Elliot when she discovers the truth about him requiring loans and his ill behavior toward her friend Mrs. Smith. The undercurrents she picked up on from Mr. Elliot prove themselves trustworthy, and Anne can trust herself to make her own decisions. Anne's discovery emboldens her to speak with great passion regarding a woman's view of love.

I hope I do justice to all that is felt by you, and by those who resemble you. God forbid that I should undervalue the warm and faithful feelings of any of my fellow creatures. I should deserve utter contempt if I dared to suppose that true attachment and constancy were known only by women. No, I believe you capable of everything great and good in your married lives. I believe you equal to every important exertion, and to every domestic forbearance, so long as—if I may be allowed the expression, so long as you have an object. I mean, while the woman you love lives, and lives for you. All the privilege I claim for my own sex (it is not a very enviable one, you need not covet it) is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone.

(Austen *Persuasion* 220)

"We may notice her gradual 'expansion' of speech; from her silence in the initial chapters, through her scarce remarks until" (Bystydzieńska) in this impassioned speech, we see Anne come to the fullness of her transformation. Austen has stripped down every form of cultural and personal persuasion until Anne can move forward from her own convictions.

Persuasion continues Jane Austen's commentary on society's inequalities regarding women and their autonomy. Here Anne Elliott must overcome her father's and older sister's conceits and hierarchy in the family. She also has to overcome the advice of an older neighbor lady, a friend of her mother's, who advises her against her idea of happiness. Austen shows

through Anne's eyes the growth that was taking place in society during this time as women sought to speak up and live their own lives according to their desires.

In *Jane Eyre*, written in 1847, we have an example of both a Romantic and a Gothic novel. Written by Charlotte Brontë, it incorporates both a governess plot and a romantic plot. The protagonist, Jane Eyre, first must suffer at the hands of a cruel family and then a cruel headmaster. Jane as a child finds herself at the mercy of the adults entrusted to care for her. Her maternal aunt, Sarah Reed, is her caretaker. But Mrs. Reed is resentful of Jane's place in their family, and she becomes abusive, allowing her children to abuse their cousin. Jane is mercilessly tormented until Mrs. Reed sends her away to boarding school. Mrs. Reed lies to the headmaster so that Jane goes into the school with a bad reputation. She is then singled out by the headmaster, Mr. Brocklehurst, for punishment. Jane's childhood abuse allows the reader to see that she comes from an orphan mindset and that everyone is against her. The beginning of the story sets up Jane's growth into a person of value in her own right.

Jane finds solace in the friendship of a girl named Helen Burns at Lowood, along with the mentorship of her instructor Miss Temple. Helen dies, signifying more loss for Jane. When she is an adult, she teaches at Lowood. She then finds some bit of independence as a governess, escaping the very place where she was tormented as a student. Her student is a girl named Adele, the supposed love child of a French woman, and Mr. Rochester, her employer. Jane falls in love with Mr. Rochester over the course of her employment, as he treats her kindly without humiliating her.

After discovering that he is married to an insane woman, she leaves. Once again, Jane is left alone. She ends up on the doorstep of St John Rivers and his two sisters, Diana and Mary. She finds a job teaching at a local school and grows close to the sisters. But after some time, St

John discovers Jane's true identity and tells her that her long-lost uncle has left her an estate. St John knows this because they are related, and he and his sisters were hoping to be in the inheritance but were left without a significant inheritance. Jane now has the means to be completely independent and has gained a family with which she shares her inheritance. This act of redemption brings Jane a sense of value and worth. Just as Jane is considering a marriage proposal from St John, she hears Mr. Rochester calling her. She returns to Rochester, deciding to love him regardless of the circumstances. In the end, Jane "learned to be her agent for change" (Elbert 807).

Charlotte Brontë writes *Jane Eyre* as a means of discussing class, romance, and independence. During the Romantic Period, women were not often allowed the freedom of thought to choose whom to marry. She employs the governess plot as a means of introducing her heroine to romance. Yet it is through Jane's autonomy that she ultimately chooses to love Mr. Rochester; she is not trapped into marrying for money or status. Brontë shows that independence brought both the opportunities for meeting and choosing her spouse, cleverly turning the governess plot into a tale of self-determination.

Charlotte Brontë continues the feminist theme from Jane Austen and takes it a step further. Rather than having Jane Eyre succumb to the whims of her aunt or even Mr. Rochester, she chooses to live life on her own terms. She escapes to the moors and those that end up being family. This shows a courage and self-will that was previously not written for women characters. She *chooses* to return to Mr. Rochester and willing to live with or near him despite his marriage to insane Bertha, unknowing that Bertha has died and Mr. Rochester is wounded. This would have been scandalous during the time period. But Brontë writes a story of a self-determined woman able to stand on her own.

Written shortly after *Jane Eyre* in 1910, Edith Wharton wrote a short story called "The Letters" that also utilized the governess plot. However, unlike Brontë's Romantic story, "in *The Letters*, Wharton rewrites the Gothic governess plot" (808). The protagonist in this story, Lizzie West, is hired as a tutor for Juliet, the daughter of Mr. Vincent Deering. This story is quite similar to Brontë's in that there is a wife that dies, and "Lizzie receives a surprise inheritance from a distant relative" (809).

Lizzie is hired to teach Mr. Deering's daughter, Juliet. Mr. Deering and Lizzie engage in a flirtation that seems not to matter until, after a trip to the countryside, he informs Lizzie that his wife is dead. He must visit America to take care of some of his wife's affairs but will eagerly await letters from Lizzie. After being abroad and not answering Lizzie's letters, Lizzie accepts that Mr. Deering is no longer interested in her. After a few years, Mr. Deering and Lizzie meet again. He does not seem interested in her until he discovers that she has inherited and is wealthier than him. He convinces her to marry him.

Unlike *Jane Eyre*, Lizzie is not madly in love with her husband but has come to accept the frailties and realities of their marriage.

As her husband advanced up the path, she had a sudden trembling vision of their three years together. Those years were her whole life; everything before them had been colorless and unconscious, like the blind life of the plant before it reaches the surface of the soil. They had not been exactly what she dreamed; but if they had taken away certain illusions, they had left richer realities in their stead. She understood now that she had gradually adjusted herself to the new image of her husband as he was, as he

would always be. He was not the hero of her dream, but he was the man she loved, and who had loved her. For she saw now, in this last wide flash of pity and initiation, that, as a solid marble may be made out of worthless scraps of mortar, glass and pebbles, so out of mean mixed substances may be fashioned a love that will bear the stress of life.

(Wharton)

Wharton shows in her plot that you can have both independence, for Lizzie did have other suitors to choose from and lived in a less-than-ideal situation. The plot follows Lizzie as she grows from a romantic woman and accepts what comes her way. "Lizzie, to save face, writes a kind letter, refusing to give him an ultimatum" (Elbert 809). In the end, "Lizzie settles for a pedestrian love and utilitarian life, which makes her feel duped but also pragmatic" (810), becoming the picture of a Gothic woman.

These two stories both utilize a governess plot, but towards two different purposes. These independent women depict both differing periods of literature and differing examples of what love can look like. Both examples serve to bring about acceptance of love in all of its forms. For not everyone has a passionate love story like that of Jane and Rochester, and not everyone settles into a quiet, steady love like that of Lizzie and Mr. Deering. It should be noted that Wharton had a copy of *Jane Eyre* and had studied this tome prior to writing her short story "The Letters." A novel of this importance surely had an influence on her writing. "Wharton recognized that the love plot in *Jane Eyre* was not realistic" (805), and so wrote her own version that matched her Gothic sensibilities.

Gone with the Wind, an American novel published in 1936, was written by Margaret Mitchell. It received The Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1937. The story depicts a young woman coming of age in the American Civil War and its aftermath. Scarlett O'Hara faces a series of challenges, some of her own making, that propel her to "become a new woman who speaks her mind. As the strong heroine in the story who demonstrates her indefatigable determination, she becomes the model for survival for many" (Barber 43).

While the plot of *Gone with the Wind* is multi-layered and nuanced, I will focus on Scarlett's personal metamorphosis through the following factors: relationships, tragedies, and love. Scarlett is the eldest of three daughters, along with sisters Carreen and Suellen, living on a wealthy estate in Georgia. The Civil War is about to break out, and she is primarily concerned about marrying her neighbor, Ashley Wilkes. She knew how to manipulate the men in her life, beginning with her father.

Scarlett was impressed less than anyone else by his tempers and his roarings. She was his oldest child, and, now that Gerald knew there would be no more sons to follow the three who lay in the family burying ground, he had drifted into a habit of treating her in a man-to-man manner which she found most pleasant. She was more like her father than her younger sisters.

(Mitchell 20)

This foundational relationship allowed her to manipulate others while she desired to be like her mother, Ellen, a strong, independent woman. She dies in the story of typhoid. "Scarlett has few friends, and she has no one close to her. Melanie (the woman who actually marries Ashley Wilkes) is Scarlett's only real friend; she uplifts Scarlett and defends her to others, often going out of her way for her friend" (Barber 15). While her lack of healthy friendships begins as a

detriment to Scarlett, it eventually ends up being a catalyst that allows her to grow. "Her relationships throughout the novel illustrate how Scarlett matures and develops her perspectives on people" (10). She grows in learning to appreciate those around her rather than finding them useless or merely tools to use to reach her goals. Melanie remains a faithful friend throughout the story despite Scarlett's misadventures. She provides a role model for Scarlett in how to act in a healthy relationship.

The plot of *Gone with the Wind* is fraught with tragedies. As she matures, the tragedies that Scarlett faces grow in importance. Her first, according to Bobbie Lou Barber, is her discovery that she has not won the heart of Ashley Wilkes, and he is engaged to Melanie. Scarlett's rejection hits her tender heart profoundly. She decides to marry Melanie's brother, Wade Hamilton, but he is sent off to war and promptly dies. She gives birth to his son. Her status as a widow disallows her to now be seen with other young men, adding to her despair.

Her second greatest tragedy occurs when Rhett abandons Scarlett on the road home from Atlanta. Frustrated with death and dying, Scarlett must live up to the promise she made to Ashley and help Melanie have her baby, despite the sounds of the cannons coming closer as the looming devastation of the war grows louder. All Scarlett can think of is returning home to Tara and her mother.

(14)

Scarlett learns to search within herself to find meaning, which she finds in her home. She is immediately thrust into the next tragedy. "Her third tragedy begins when she returns home from Atlanta and finds the plantation ravaged as well as her mother dead, sisters sick, and father insane" (15). Upon losing her stalwart mother, Scarlett is forced to face herself as she is. She must now become an adult, not playing at parties and acting wildly. She is the oldest, with one

parent gone and the other unable to offer support or guidance. These circumstances represent a significant turning point in the story for Scarlett.

Scarlett begins the story believing that she is in love with Ashley Wilkes. She marries both Wade Hamilton and Rhett Butler, a man that she met when confronting Ashley about marrying Melanie. Rhett witnessed her humiliation but fell in love with her anyway. Scarlett is constantly pulled to Ashley, despite her marriages. She sets him on a pedestal of girlish infatuation that doesn't leave until the end. She never examines her own personality and what character traits in a mate would be complementary to her. Ashley continues to be an obstacle to Scarlett finding her true love until the end. She shares a quote with Rhett, who asks her why she said that.

Rhett said sharply: "Why did you say that? That's what I meant."

"It was something that—that Ashley said once, about the old days."

He shrugged and the light went out of his eyes.

"Always Ashley," he said and was silent for a moment.

(Mitchell 731)

Scarlett doesn't realize what she has done until it is too late.

She had never understood either of the men she had loved and so she had lost them both.

Now, she had a fumbling knowledge that, had she ever understood Ashley, she would never have loved him; had she ever understood Rhett, she would never have lost him. She wondered forlornly if she had ever really understood anyone in the world.

(732)

She recognizes the weight of what her misunderstandings have cost her but vows to win him back.

Margaret Mitchell uses these three elements of her plot (relationships, tragedies, and love) to push Scarlett into change. Because the people and circumstances surrounding her change, she must change. Scarlett cannot stay in one place; that becomes physically and emotionally impossible. In the end, she finally begins to know herself.

In her Mark of the Lion series, Francine Rivers writes a sweeping story of a young Jewish slave girl Hadassah during first-century Rome. This story is technically a slave/master romance. However, Francine Rivers goes beyond a love story to write a tale of humble submission and spiritual growth. Hadassah is a slave to a wealthy Roman family that believes in many Roman gods. Hadassah primarily serves the daughter of the family, Julia, and is about the same age as Julia. Hadassah is a Christian Jew and serves with integrity and loyalty. She falls in love with Marcus, Julia's brother. The first two books of the series, *A Voice in the Wind* and *An Echo in the Darkness*, follow the story of Hadassah.

In *A Voice in the Wind*, written in 1993, Hadassah is captured in Jerusalem and made to serve the wealthy Valerian family and is appointed to serve Julia. Julia is petty and cruel, constantly threatening to punish Hadassah. Marcus is intrigued by Hadassah as he sees her faith and is physically drawn to her. Within his rights to have sex with her, he refrains, feeling something different than mere lust for her.

Julia is sent to marry a wealthy older man, and Hadassah goes with her as her servant, but Julia despises him, mainly because of the age difference. She chafes against the gender roles of Roman society and asserts her independence, albeit childishly. While Julia runs off to see the men in the gladiator training camps, her husband dies, leaving her a wealthy widow. She and Hadassah move back in with the Valerian family. Marcus and Hadassah get to know each other better and become more involved. Hadassah shares her faith with Marcus.

Julia falls in love with a charming young man and remarries. However, he has hidden his cruelty and gambling debts from her. He beats her repeatedly and gambles away her money. She has an affair with a gladiator and gets pregnant.

At first, Hadassah stayed with the Valerian family at the request of the father. Everyone fell in love with her good nature and her loyalty. Marcus was glad to have her at home. But eventually, Julia convinces them she needs her back, so Hadassah leaves to serve Julia. She finds Julia wanting to have an abortion and begs her not to but ends up burying the baby for Julia. Hadassah consistently and quietly serves and models Jesus to Julia. But this only causes Julia to fight even harder against Hadassah's kindness. Julia eventually ends up murdering her abusive husband but is weighed down by her guilt. Julia projects this hatred of herself onto Hadassah when she finds out that Marcus has asked Hadassah to marry him. Hadassah cannot marry him unless he professes Jesus as his savior. Julia lures Hadassah to a party where she is requested to bow down to the emperor. When she does not, she is arrested and sentenced to the arena and the lions. Julia takes Marcus to the games, thinking that he will be happy. But when Hadassah walks out singing with arms raised in praise, Marcus walks out, knowing that he did not protect Hadassah from his bitter sister.

Throughout the novel, Hadassah is a fearful but obedient servant, seeking to honor God with her choices and behavior. She learns to be strong in her faith and stand up for what she believes in, even turning down Marcus's marriage proposal because she knows it isn't right. Ultimately, she overcomes her fear of losing her life and faces the lions in the arena. Hadassah does not die but lives, and her story continues in *An Echo in the Darkness*.

Each encounter with her master requires a response from Hadassah: obedience or disobedience, love or hate, forgiveness or bitterness. Rivers plots a story with constant

challenges for Hadassah and constant opportunities to grow or retreat. Hadassah grows beyond a romantic figure into one of service and strength. Rather than being a feminist example, she is an example of faith and courage, putting her trust in Someone other than herself.

Five women authors and six stories show that plot is a valuable tool in the growth of the stories' protagonists in women's fiction. All of these authors used their cultural realities to write about strong women. Whether that was gaining independence, learning to accept situations for what they were, or knowing oneself, every protagonist was different than she was at the beginning of the story. Plots do not need to be intricate or stories long for a character to see substantial growth. But they do need to be written well with a goal or measurement of growth to be engaging and successful.

Chapter 1

The waves lapped my toes while the wind swept its fingers through my long, blonde hair. The fading sun warmed my pale cheeks as I watched it fade into the horizon. But my heart was cold—colder than it had ever been. I didn't know how to warm it. I'd tried so many different things. I was afraid that I would grow so cold that my heart would turn to ice, freezing every bit of life within me. And I would no longer care.

I'm not sure how long I stood there after the sun had waved its last goodbye. The ocean air was now cool and crisp, and moisture accumulated on my cheeks and eyelashes. I barely registered the cold, although I was shivering in my jean shorts and a tank top. I knew that I should go home, but I just couldn't leave the sound of the waves. Their constant crashing spoke a promise to my heart: if they could keep breaking upon the shore, then my heart could keep beating, and dawn would come.

~

I laid in bed with my eyes shut tight, trying with desperation to hear what I did not. The house was a silent witness to my grief. The coffee machine didn't beep. The smell of bacon didn't wake me. I was alone. My stomach began to churn, and I ran out of bed, making it to the toilet just in time. For twenty-nine days, every morning had begun exactly the same way, ever since two officers from my husband's army battalion arrived at my door and said, "Mrs. Hope Diaz? We're sorry to inform you..." Friends were commenting on how loosely my clothes fit. I could barely keep anything down. Only my body's desire for calories drove me to eat later in the afternoon.

I supposed that I had better pull myself together. I sat up and waited to see how I felt. If I didn't make it to the restaurant, my mother would come looking for me. She had insisted on our lunch, and she would not take "no" for an answer. I was avoiding her. I hadn't seen her since Christopher's funeral. I knew that she would chide me in that cool way of hers. She would be concerned, but not exactly warm or compassionate, an attribute that came from her parents and a private school education. I supposed that her ability to be polite and professional made Wendy Hughes a great realtor. She is always put together and chic, unlike myself. I usually have flour all over me from my work as a baker, especially in my hair, and I say whatever comes to mind. I turned the handle on the shower and got in before the water was warm, hoping the shock of cold water might give my stomach something else to focus on.

~

As usual, I was running late. My mom was waiting for me at our favorite restaurant, Loui's. Instead of waiting inside like a normal person, she remained outside in her skirt suit and heels. "Hope, you really need to take better care of yourself. Your attire is ill-fitting, and you look disheveled. Couldn't you at least choose something to wear besides jeans and that old sweatshirt?" she said immediately while holding the restaurant door open for me.

"Hi, Mom. You look wonderful, as usual," I said, trying to keep my tone pleasant. I walked through the door and waited for her to take the lead to the hostess desk.

"I know that you're grieving, but please try to take better care of yourself. When you make an effort in your appearance, it helps your mood," she said in a low voice that only I could hear.

She didn't say anything else as the hostess took us to our seats. She wouldn't dream of being inappropriate in a nice restaurant. I knew more was coming. She never just said something and then let it go.

The smell of garlic filled the room. I thought about Loui's fantastic lasagna. Mmm. There was a soft hum as people ate lunch and spoke to each other, while the plush carpeting muffled our footsteps. We walked past men in business suits and women in designer blouses, then sat down at a linen-covered table by a window. After we gave our drink orders to the hostess, Mom started up again. "Hope, I'm trying to be understanding. Truly. When your father died, I was a young mother with a child to care for alone. In retrospect, I suppose that gave me a reason to get up every day and keep going. Are you going to work? What do you do all day? Hope, I really am concerned."

I kept my eyes focused on my hands in my lap as she spoke, twisting my wedding ring around and around. I could feel the weight of her eyes scrutinizing every detail of my appearance. I know she meant well, but she seemed to fall just short of the mark. I decided to take her at her word. I couldn't imagine going through what I'm going through and having a six-year-old to also take care of without a husband. Surely, she knew what she was talking about. The waitress set our iced teas on the table and placed our silverware along with plates of bread and olive oil onto the table.

"Mom," I started but couldn't finish. A great lump formed in my throat, and I could barely swallow, let alone talk. Unbidden, tears made their way out of the corners of my eyes, and I looked up, reaching for my napkin. I tried again. "I'm part-time at the bakery now. I go in every afternoon. I've been doing some work at the counter again. Matt says that I can come back to baking whenever I'm ready. I just haven't been feeling well. I'm *really* not well. I'm not

making this up. I'm sick. I think it's just the way that my body is grieving," I said, wishing that I could make her understand. I tried to make my voice sound a little brighter. "Thankfully, I can stay in base housing for quite a few more months, so I'm not worried about rent or anything. I've put all of his death benefits into my savings account. Please, try not to worry about me. I'm sure I'll be back to working full-time next year. I have time to figure this all out." I didn't mention that I had absolutely no desire to figure anything out. I simply wanted things the way that they were before Christopher deployed and a sniper shot him while he was on patrol.

Mom reached across the table and placed her hand on mine, an unusual attempt at physical connection. "I do understand, Hope. I do. And I think that it might be a good idea for you to find a grief support group. Don't they offer that on the army post? You might want to look into it," she said softly. Her eyes were just a little too bright, and her mouth pursed. She didn't take her hand off of mine. "I'm not cut out for that. But I'm here for you. And I don't like seeing you like this. I think that it might help. You're much more candid than I am."

I placed my other hand on top of hers and gave it a squeeze. If my mom could try to be supportive, I could try to take her advice. I honestly didn't know how I would do this, but I still cared what she thought about me. Probably too much. "I'll look into it, Mom. I haven't read through all of the info the army gave me yet. I promise I will." We pulled our hands apart as the waitress placed our entrees in front of us. My hands felt cold where hers had been.

My stomach roiled as I smelled the lasagna. It is the best at Loui's. I had been looking forward to this. I quickly excused myself and ran to the restroom. Was it the stress of dealing with my mother? Maybe I needed to make a doctor's appointment.

Chapter 2

The church stood on a quiet corner within view of the harbor. The directions said to go around toward the alley and the entrance would be down a set of steps. Weren't these kinds of things always in church basements? I really didn't want to be here. Yet I knew that sleeping until noon and working four hours and returning home to bed was no kind of life. So, I walked down those steps with a bravado that I didn't feel.

When I entered through the double glass doors, a tall, red-headed lady was standing there. She looked very elegant in a tailored silk pantsuit. I recognized the designer thanks to my mother. She turned toward me as the door whooshed shut behind me. She smiled a wide smile. "You must be Hope. I'm Regan Scott," she said as she extended a hand and rested it on my arm. "I'm sure there's somewhere else you'd rather be, but I'm glad you're here."

Her candor shook my usual canned response to "I'm sorry for your loss" right out of my thoughts. I blinked.

"I know. It's not usual for people to be so blunt around you. Everyone walks on tippy-toes like you're going to have a meltdown right there. I remember. My husband has been gone for five years now. I have a daughter and a son. My daughter is grown and my son is a senior. We've had our days...and our meltdowns. Now come with me. Do you like coffee? It's not bad." Regan kept hold of my arm and walked me down the hall and through the door on the right. It was your typical meeting room, with stacking chairs set in a circle. About half of them had people sitting in them, mostly women. She motioned toward the coffee.

"I don't think I want any. To be honest, I haven't had much appetite since I found out about Christopher," I answered. I turned to her and asked, "Is that normal? I mean, I'm honestly

throwing up just about every day. It's been almost two months. Everyone says that it's just grief, but is that normal?"

"I'm a nurse. I would say that it's not outside the realm of possibility. But you might want to have a checkup anyway. Especially with the shock. It couldn't hurt," she said softly. Her brown eyes looked at me kindly, yet I felt the concern underneath the smile. Was it just normal concern? Or did she think that something was seriously wrong? I couldn't tell anymore. Everyone was concerned about me.

"Why don't you grab a seat? I'm going to answer this text from work and I'll be right back. The leader's name is Sophie. She's the one standing over there by the cookies. She's been leading this group for ten years. We all call her Mama Sophie. Be right back." She stepped away from me and went back out into the hall.

I suddenly felt adrift without her arm in mine. I looked at the circle of chairs. About ten women sat. A few were talking to each other and two sat by themselves. I approached the chairs and sat by one of the women sitting by herself. She looked to be about ten years older than myself. I sat down, but she didn't look up. Instead, another woman leaned toward me and said, "Hi, I'm Greta. First time? I've only been coming for a month. Welcome." She looked a bit closer to my age.

"Hi. I'm Hope. Yes, first time." I wasn't sure what else to say. But just then, Regan sat down next to me, and Sophie stepped into the circle and sat down.

"Welcome everyone! This is GriefShare specifically for military spouses. We're here to support you and have you support each other. I'm Sophie Weston. My Hal has been gone for 15 years," she said. "Now usually, we have a time of introductions, but I'm going to save that for

later. We have a speaker today to talk about how grief can affect your other relationships: parents, siblings, children, and friends. I'd like to introduce Dr. Stephen Curry."

Dr. Curry began to talk about how others might treat you, how to respond, what was normal, how friends might either stifle or disappear. I glanced at the women sitting around me, from my age up to about forty. It was a diverse mix of well-dressed and casual, white, Asian, and black. It seemed like everyone else was as quiet as I was, listening to Dr. Curry speak. Twice someone asked a question regarding how to politely decline invitations and how to choose which friends were let in to our grief. At the end, we gave a quick introduction of ourselves, and then the meeting began to break up. I mostly felt relieved that I didn't have to talk much. I was thankful to just listen and absorb. Much of what he said made sense, especially how I didn't want to do things that I liked to do before.

We were standing up to go when Regan reached over from two seats away. She handed me her phone and said, "Please put your information in for me. I'd love to connect with you soon if you're free. Let me know your schedule." I quickly entered my information into her contacts and handed the phone back.

"I think that would be fine," I said. "I work mostly in the afternoons right now. But I'm off two days a week. So, mornings or those days would be alright."

"Great. I'll check my work schedule and get back with you. I just texted you so that you can reach out. I work odd hours at the hospital, so it doesn't matter when you call or text. I'll get back to you if I can't answer right away. If you need to call me at midnight, I'm probably up. Look, I know we just met, but sometimes talking to a stranger is easier than people who love you."

~

I pulled into the driveway with sweat dripping into my eyes. The car's air conditioner had conked out, and I needed to get my groceries into the house before they turned into messy puddles. It didn't happen often, but the temps in the Seattle area were sweltering. My dress stuck to my back as I grabbed the bags from the trunk.

I noticed that the grass needed to be mowed. I had hired a neighbor boy after I found out about Christopher. "They" were really uptight about lawn maintenance on post. But I wasn't going to complain. I was able to live in military housing for up to a year after Christopher died, which gave me time to decide what was next.

I walked toward the door with the heat of the sun making my shoulders burn even hotter. Stacy, my next-door neighbor, was sitting on her porch swing. "Are we still on for dinner tonight?"

Her husband was still deployed. Both Christopher and Ben had been working together for a while before the accident. I liked her and didn't mind our get-togethers, but I wasn't close to her. I heard her share just a bit too much about other neighbors or acquaintances. This made me uncomfortable.

"Sure," I said. "Let me get these in the house and grab a shower. I'll be over in about an hour." I hurried up the steps and juggled the bags with the keys, and let myself in.

I put the groceries away and then I sank into the over-stuffed, gray couch and dozed in the air-conditioned room. My body was spent. Day after day of nausea. Day after day of grief. Day after day of going through the motions, not really knowing what was next. Not really caring. I felt myself getting sucked into sleep, and I just reached for the throw and let it happen.

~

I heard a buzzing sound, but I didn't want to open my eyes. I heard it again, more insistent this time, a double buzzing. Then a pounding. I waited to see if it would stop. My eyes opened, and I pulled the throw off of me. I waited. I heard a voice, "Hope, are you in there? You were supposed to be over for dinner forty-five minutes ago. Are you ok?" It was Stacy.

I heaved myself up to answer the door. "I'm sorry. I fell asleep in the cool air. It felt so good. Come in, and I'll change quickly." She stood there looking like she was modeling for a commercial in jean shorts, a red t-shirt, and white tennis shoes. Her short, brown hair looked like she had just come from the salon.

Stacy didn't answer but just looked at me for a few moments, staring with her jade green eyes. I was about to say something when she spoke. "Are you alright? You don't look great."

"I'm fine," I said. "I think the heat just got to me today. Let me put on some shorts. Come on in." She stepped into the living room, while I moved to the bedroom. I changed and went to the bathroom to splash some water on my face and brush my hair. The wall plug gave off the smell of jasmine. It somehow calmed me after the abrupt awakening. I was as ready as I would ever be. Feeling better, I joined Stacy in the living room.

I grabbed my keys off of the coffee table. "Do you want me to bring anything?"

Stacy turned from looking out the window. "I've got everything ready. I just need to toss the salad with some dressing."

It was still hot outside, but the nap had refreshed me, and my stomach had settled. I locked the door. We walked across the lawn to Stacy's identical, small home. The homes in base

housing had subtle differences on the outside, but inside was the same basic plan. Our home layout was a two-bedroom, one-bath plan with a small patio on the back and a fenced yard. Some of our neighbors had three bedrooms. This was a neighborhood of young enlisted troops. About half of the families had children. Stacy and I did not.

Her small living room was full of color. While mine was muted neutrals of grey and cream, Stacy's shouted with vibrant hues of red and yellow and blue. Her table was set with mismatched Fiesta pottery, an example of her many eclectic decorating choices.

"Have a seat while I grab the salad. Do you want a soda?" she asked.

"That sounds good," I replied. I took the covers off the platters and set them on the counter before sitting down.

Stacy came back to the table with two glass bottles of soda. "Did you see that Jeff and Monica got a new car? I don't know how they can with two kids in daycare, and Monica is only working part-time."

I steeled myself to be kind. "I didn't see that. I'm sure they're doing fine."

Stacy served the salad and grilled chicken and potatoes. "I just think that they could have gotten something more economical. Splashing out on that SUV must have hurt them."

~

The wind lifted the wet hairs off of my neck as I stepped out of the car. It was another hot day, and the air conditioning was still not working in my car. The repair shop couldn't get me in for another week. Heat radiated off of the parking lot. I walked quickly toward the medical plaza. I looked for numbers on the buildings set in a quadrangle to find the doctor's office. I entered the

glass building to my right, and the cool air chilled me as I entered the lobby. The marble floors reflected the lights above. This was my first time seeing a doctor since Chris and I were married. I had had no reason to go. The base hospital did not see dependents, so I got to see a “real” doctor, as we spouses like to call them.

I stepped into the elevator, and a young mom with a curly-haired toddler jumped in at the last minute. The toddler looked pale, and her blue eyes were sunken in. “Hi! Are you going to the oncology floor, too?” the mom asked. Her hair was unbrushed, and her clothes were wrinkly. I wanted to give her a hug.

“No, I’m going to the top floor. I think he’s a family medicine doctor. The military sent me. I’ve never been here before,” I replied. I began to worry. *Maybe I belong on the oncology floor? I still have no idea why I keep getting sick.*

“I’m sorry, that was rude of me,” she said. She reached over and put her hand on my arm in a gesture of kindness. “My name is Meg. This is Carly. I’m just used to everyone that I see going to the oncology floor. I try to welcome the new faces. I forget that there is life apart from cancer.”

“Please, don’t think anything of it. I’m sure that those new faces appreciate a friendly gesture,” I reply. I certainly appreciate her warmth on the way to my own appointment.

“Thanks. I try. It helps me to remember that there are others going through the same thing that we are. Cancer really makes you focus on your own trials. I hope your doctor visit goes well.” She turns to her daughter. “This is us, Carly. Do you want the grape lollypop today?” She held her daughter’s hand and exited. The floor looked cold and impersonal. I sighed with relief when the doors closed, grateful that I *wasn’t* going to that floor, and I continued on to the next.

The doors opened to a large reception area. Blue chairs were arranged in groups of four, and the counter held clipboards with paperwork waiting to be filled out. “Can I help you?” asked an older woman behind the counter.

“I’m here to see Dr. Brasch. My name is Hope Diaz,” I said.

“Welcome, Hope. Please take a clipboard and fill out the paperwork. I’ll need a copy of your insurance card.”

I gave her my military ID and took a clipboard. I sat in a chair facing the window. The view of the sound always took my breath away. I could see a Navy submarine leaving the area and seagulls flying above the water. It was a beautiful morning.

“Hope,” said a medical assistant. She was standing by a door to the back offices. “Come on back. I’ll take the clipboard. And here’s your ID back.” She handed me my card in exchange for the paperwork I had filled out and then led me to an exam room. It was a standard room with an exam table and two chairs. A rolling stool sat tucked under a desk area. “I’m Amber. I’ll be helping Dr. Brasch today. Why don’t you have a seat and tell me what brings you here today.” She pulled the stool out and sat down, placing the clipboard in front of her as she logged into a computer on the desk.

I hesitated. Where should I start? Months ago, with the officers at the door? Or just the facts about not being able to keep food down? “I can’t seem to eat lately without getting sick. I don’t always throw up, but I feel that way. I don’t know if it’s the stress that I’ve been under lately. But I’ve lost ten pounds.” I hope that I said the right thing. I squeezed my knees with my hands and bounced my feet.

“How long have you been feeling this way? What kind of stress are you under?” Amber asked.

“Well, my husband was deployed, but he died. I found out about two months ago. That’s about when I started to get sick. And I just want to stay in bed. I don’t know, but someone said I might be depressed. I’m not sure what depressed would be in this situation,” I replied.

“I’m so sorry about your husband. I’m sure Dr. Brasch will help you figure it out. Let me take your vitals, and then he’ll be right in.” She placed a monitor on my finger and put a thermometer up to my forehead and then wrote some notes in the computer. “Everything is normal. I’ll tell him that you’re ready.”

Amber left the room, and the door quietly closed behind her. I shivered in the air conditioning and wrapped my arms around myself. I felt a blanket of fatigue fall on me once I let myself sit still. It enveloped me, and the only reason that I didn’t nod off was because of the involuntary shaking to keep myself warm.

I heard a light knock on the door before it opened. A tall, sandy-haired man entered. *He seems young to be a doctor.* He smiled and sat on the rolling stool to come to my eye level.

“I’m Dr. Brasch. I understand that you haven’t been feeling well and that you have been through a recent trauma. Why don’t you tell me what’s been going on exactly?” He leaned slightly toward me and waited.

I told him about Christopher’s death, my stomach issues, and the fatigue I had fought ever since. “Some days, I really just don’t want to get out of bed. Some days I’m a bit better. I can usually eat by dinner time. I just thought that I was grieving in my own way, but my friends and family wanted me to make sure that nothing else was wrong. Do you think something else could be wrong?” I asked.

“Well, I’m not sure. There is something physically happening; whether that is grief showing up or something else entirely, we are going to find out, okay? I will help you figure this

out, and if you need counseling, we'll find out. If there is something else, we'll find out. I won't leave you with unanswered questions." His reassuring tone had me convinced that he was on my team. I liked him. I hadn't been to the doctor much before, but I knew that I had found a good one. "I'm going to send you downstairs to get some labs done. We're going to check for some basic things like thyroid levels and white blood count to check for infection. And I'm going to order a pregnancy test. I know that you said Christopher was deployed, but it's not outside the realm of possibility. We are going to rule everything out, okay?"

I nodded. He turned to the desk and took out a paper from the drawer. He seemed to be checking boxes and then signed with a flourish. "Head downstairs. The lab is on the first floor in the corner. There are signs on the walls with directions. When you're done, come back up. They run them right away. It shouldn't take long." He stood and squeezed my shoulder. "I don't want you worrying. Amber will be back to show you the way out."

"Thank you," I managed to say. He nodded and left the room. I stood as Amber entered and a whooshing sound filled my ears. I closed my eyes while at the same time reaching for the exam table to steady myself.

"Are you feeling alright?" Amber asked. "Have you been able to eat anything today?"

My eyes still closed, I shook my head. The whooshing was still there.

"Before you go downstairs, let me get you some juice. The labs aren't fasting labs. Sit back down, and I'll be right back."

I wasn't going to argue. I reached behind me for the chair that I had been sitting in. I plopped down. I noticed the antiseptic smell of the room and looked around. I saw that there were pictures of Pike Place Market and the Space Needle on the wall. I love visiting those

places. I love the smell of the ocean and the market stalls and freshly roasted coffee from a shop just around the corner from the Space Needle.

“Here you go.” Amber handed me a small bottle of orange juice and some graham crackers. “You’re going to need more than this, but it should help.”

“Thank you.” She waited while I ate and drank. She reached for the containers and threw them away after I handed them to her.

“I’ll show you out. It can be confusing finding your way back to the waiting area.” We walked down the hall and made several turns. “Once you get out of the elevator, make two lefts, and you’ll see the lab straight in front of you. When you’re done, come back up and check-in at the desk again. It shouldn’t take long to get the results.”

“Thank you,” I said again. I walked through the waiting area and out into the hall. Sunlight came through the glass walls and filled the hallway. It seemed to promise that everything really would be okay.

Chapter 3

I finished my testing at the lab and made my way back upstairs. Amber was up at the front desk waiting for me. She took me back to the same room that I had been in before. I let myself just sit in the chair and rest. Somehow, the weight of the world seemed to be lifting off of my shoulders as I allowed myself to get help and see a doctor. With my eyes closed, I could hear myself breathing. I focused on making my breath even. In and out. The sun was coming in through the window at just the right angle to warm my legs. I started to doze off. There was a light tapping on the door.

“Well, Hope, I think we have found the answer for all of your symptoms. And no, you’re not simply grieving. There is a reason for being sick,” Dr. Brasch said after he entered the room. I sat straight up, fully awake now. He sat down on the stool across from me. “Hope, I know that you’re probably not expecting it, but you’re pregnant. And based on symptoms and when Christopher was last home, I’d say that you’re about eleven weeks or maybe just a little more. What you’re experiencing is completely normal for the first and early into the second trimester. You’re going to want to get set up with an OB/GYN doctor.”

I sat there. Thoughts spun around in my head until I felt dizzy. My stomach started to knot. And then it was too late. I stood up and leaned over the sink letting my stomach empty itself. I stood there in disbelief. “How can that be? I haven’t felt pregnant. Nothing at all except for being sick.”

“Hope, I know it’s a shock. Here’s a cup of water. I’m sure that you equated the fatigue with your grief, if you even felt tired. You were focused on your loss. Anything that may have clued you in under normal circumstances were eclipsed, if you even had any signs. Many women have no symptoms whatsoever during the first trimester,” Dr. Brasch said. “Let me get Amber and we’ll get this cleaned up.” He went out and came back just as quickly with Amber.

I put the empty water cup in the trash and sat down again, slightly relieved at the feeling of emptiness in my stomach. Except that my stomach wasn’t empty. *What in the world was I going to do? I could barely take care of myself since the accident.*

“Hope, what are you thinking?” Dr. Brasch asked.

“I don’t know what to think. What should I think? I don’t even know what to think, let alone what to do,” I mumbled.

“Do you have support? Do you have family around? You’re going to need them. If you like, we can also set you up with a psychologist. It might help you to get your bearings right now.”

Amber was working quietly in the background to clean up the mess that I had made. She slipped out the door but came right back in. “Here’s a ginger ale and some crackers,” she said and handed me a can and some saltines. I took a drink, letting the sweet liquid hit my stomach and wash away the feeling of being sick. I closed my eyes and thought of that sun streaming in as I had gone down to the lab. Everything was going to be okay, right?

~

Regan took a sip of her coffee and waited for me to finish talking. The clouds over the water were moving quickly across the sky. The waterfront bistro with its beautiful view of the harbor usually made me happy, but today, the grey weather matched the somberness in my spirit. I finished telling her about my visit to the doctor just as the clouds descended upon the water and closed in around the restaurant. Regan put her cup down and leaned forward.

“Hope, it’s not the worst thing that could happen. I’m so relieved that there isn’t something seriously wrong with you. I confess, my nursing hat certainly had you in all sorts of bad scenarios. This isn’t bad! It might be complicated, but it’s actually a good thing! How are you feeling lately? When do you see an OB doctor?” Regan asked.

“I don’t go for another week. I’m feeling alright. The sickness seems to be letting up just a little bit. But I still want to stay in bed until noon every day. I was just thinking about going back to work at the bakery full time. What am I going to do now?” I played with my fork, poking

the bit of cheesecake that I hadn't eaten. I couldn't look at Regan. The threat of tears was too much.

"Hope, look at me," Regan said. She reached out and stopped my hand from continuing to stab the cheesecake. "You're going to go on living. And you're going to take things one day at a time. You're not alone. Do you know how many people are here for you? Just think of the next thing that you need to do. And right now, that's go to work and stay healthy and go to your doctor appointment."

~

I sat on the couch and looked at the envelope sitting on the coffee table. I thought that I was brave enough to open it, but I had been sitting there for over half an hour just looking at it. I reached for it, but then my hands dropped to my lap when my heart started beating so loud that I could hear it in my ears. I still wasn't ready to read what was inside. I don't know why I was making such a big deal out of it. I was sure that Christopher hadn't said anything unusual. I reached for it again, heart pumping, and put it on my lap. It had been in the box of things that his commanding officer had sent me when Christopher died, along with his wallet and Bible that had been by his bedside. I just wasn't sure that I was ready to read his last words to me. The envelope had a stamp on it, but he had never got the chance to mail it. It felt as if I would be saying goodbye when I read this. I would never get another letter from Christopher again.

The doorbell rang, and I jumped. The envelope fell to the floor. I bent down and picked it up, clutching it to my heart. I stood and walked to the bedroom to put it back into the box in the

closet. The doorbell rang again. I went back to the living room to open it. Stacy stood there. Not exactly the person that I wanted to see, but she couldn't know that.

“Oh, there you are. I'm glad you're home. Can I come in?” she asked. She didn't wait for an answer and started to walk right between me and the door. When she was fully inside, she turned and said, “I can't tell you who I heard it from, but there is now a rumor going around that Christopher was having an affair. I don't know more than that. I don't know if it was before he left or over in Afghanistan. But I didn't want you blindsided by someone else. Of course, I'm sure that's not true.” Stacy's eyes were watching me, waiting to see how I responded. Rather than sympathy, it seemed like she was a shark after her prey. I kept looking steadily into her eyes, not wanting to show a sign of weakness to her.

“Thank you so much for telling me. I'm sure all kinds of rumors go on around the base. Would you like some water? That heat sure isn't letting up any.” I turned towards the kitchen, trying not to let her see the fear on my face. My heart hammered in my chest.

“I'm so glad that you aren't paying these things any mind. People sure know how to gossip around here! I'd love some water. Thank you,” Stacy said. She followed me into the kitchen.

I tried not to let the punch to my gut overtake me. I focused intently on getting the pitcher of water out of the refrigerator and pouring a glass without letting my hands shake. I calmed my breathing by counting. Four in. Four out. When I could smile again, I turned and handed Stacy the water. “Here you go,” I said.

She took a drink. “Oh, that just hits the right spot. Hope, I'm sure that there's nothing to those rumors. I mean, Christopher was beyond trustworthy, wasn't he?” The question at the end was waiting for an answer.

“Of course,” I answered. My mind flashed to the way that everyone loved Christopher. Surely, he wouldn’t have given in to someone being friendly, would he? I mentally shook myself. “You know, he just loved people. And everyone loved him back. He was just friendly to everyone. So, I’m sure you’re not going to say who, but where is this rumor coming from? Christopher’s values would never let him do something like that. I want to know why this is being said and who said it.” The anger of someone damaging his character began to make my blood boil. “I mean it, Stacy. Either you tell me who said it or tell them to come talk to me.”

“I’m sure you’re right, honey. Of course, Christopher would never do that.” Her face almost seemed to smirk. “And I really can’t tell you who said it. I heard it at the grocery store. I didn’t recognize the two women talking. I didn’t even think that it was your Christopher until one mentioned that he died overseas. Don’t pay any attention. I didn’t want you to hear it the way I did, though, so I told you. Thanks for the water. Are we still on for the barbecue next weekend? I’ve got to get dinner going. I’ll talk to you soon. If you need anything, call!” She set the water glass down on the counter and gave me a half hug before skipping out my front door. I closed the door behind her. I hated when people said that. I would never call her. We only talked when she seemed to want to gossip.

I walked across the room and slumped onto the sofa. Yup. The punch in the gut was still hurting. I bent over, with my head in my hands, and tried to breathe again. But all that came out were quiet sobs as doubt washed over me.

Chapter 4

I said an extra prayer of gratitude as the waiter set a hot bowl of clam chowder down in front of me. The morning sickness had mostly subsided, and I was hungry. “I’m so happy to have an appetite again,” I said.

Regan smiled across the table at me. “I remember that feeling. Those next three months, I felt the best I had ever felt during each pregnancy. They passed all too quickly.”

“Thank you for coming here for lunch. Ivar’s is one of my favorites. I know it’s touristy, but I love everything about it, and the view never gets old.” Our table was one of several along the long line of windows looking out over the Seattle harbor. The day was bright, and the sun glinted like diamonds reflected off the water. It was a postcard-perfect day. A breeze came into the restaurant through a few open windows at either end of the dining room.

“I’m happy to come here. It’s not far from work, so I’m glad you were able to work around my schedule. So, tell me. How are you doing with everything? Is work going well?” Regan asked.

I paused from taking a spoonful of my soup and looked out the window for moment. I turned back to Regan. Her green eyes were kind as they looked at me. “I really don’t know how to answer that. Some days, I’m feeling well physically. Some days, I’m completely overwhelmed with missing Christopher. I don’t know what to think about being pregnant, and the thought of raising a baby on my own frightens me. It was always Chris and me.” I stopped. My heart felt like it was a water balloon with a slow leak. All the hope that I had for our life together had been draining from me, and now it was empty. “We weren’t even planning on having a baby,” I continued. “I don’t even know where I’m going to live after my time on base housing runs out.

I'm thankful I don't have to leave for nine more months. I have time, but I don't know what I'm going to do after that." My voice caught on the last sentence. I took a drink of water.

The sound of seagulls screeching at each other came in through the windows as neither of us spoke.

"My biggest dilemma at the moment, despite everything else, is when I should read Chris's last letter to me. It was delivered with his personal effects. It has a stamp on it, and he was going to send it to me. But I'm afraid that if I read it, I'll be losing Christopher all over again. There will never be another letter from him. Whatever is in that letter will be his last words to me. I don't know if I'm ready to deal with that. How did you feel when Bryan died? Did you get any letters from his deployment after he passed?" I asked.

Regan looked thoughtful and pulled on one of her copper curls. "You know, Hope. I didn't. I think that we mostly emailed each other or talked on the phone. Bryan wasn't a big letter writer, and we were both older than you and Christopher, so our conversations were more about communicating about the kids than anything else. We both assured each other that we were fine and kept our conversations positive. There was always the tension going on under the surface, but after a few years of military life, we just did what we had to do to get through each day."

The waiter came by and refilled our water glasses. I took the opportunity to take another spoonful of the chowder. The weight of food in my belly felt wonderful.

"I think that you will know when it is the right time to read the letter, Hope. Maybe something will happen, and you will long for his words. Or maybe you'll just be at peace enough to take that step in saying goodbye. But you will know. There is no need to either rush it or to put

it off. And I'll be here if you don't want to read it alone," Regan said. "And you're braver than you believe."

My heart filled with appreciation for just how special this woman was. My own mother could barely talk to me about Christopher, and here was Regan Scott, offering to be with me as I said a final goodbye to my husband. I would have loved having her as a mom. Her kids were so blessed. "That is my favorite quote from Winnie the Pooh. Christopher Robin is pretty smart. So are you. I can't thank you enough for being here for me." I smiled at Regan. "It means everything. I'm going to believe what you said and trust that I'll know."

~

I set my cup of coffee down and pulled the magazine closer to me. It was a lazy Saturday morning, and I indulged in reading a favorite trade magazine for bakers. I couldn't believe what I saw. In the classified section was an ad for an apprentice baker. Working for my hero, Gabriel Barlowe. The best baker in England. I read it again just to make sure that what I was reading was real.

I met Gabriel Barlowe when I was in the baking program at my local community college. He was a friend of my instructor, doing her a favor by holding a workshop for the students. He had a flair for being sarcastic that bordered on disparagement. But he was excellent at both creating and teaching on baked goods, especially croissants. Once you'd had one of his chocolate almond pastries, you would never be the same.

And here he was advertising in a trade magazine for an apprentice at his bakery in England. I looked at his picture in the ad, the magazine shaking in my hands. My heart thumped, and I tried to concentrate on the specifics of how to apply. Why was I thinking about applying? I couldn't just pick up and move across the globe. Could I?

I made myself take a deep breath and closed my eyes. The smells of chocolate and almond and flour filled my head. I heard Gabriel saying, “Hope, did you want to beat up that dough or turn it into a croissant? Did your husband make you mad last night? Gently!” I felt him grab my hands and show me how to work the dough properly. It was what made me want to specialize in pastry rather than bread or cakes or pies.

A cramp in my stomach broke me out of my reverie. Ouch. A small reminder of why I couldn’t just move across the world. Another cramp hit me, gentler this time. The baby would need a support system. I would need a support system. I had that here.

I looked around at the small house that I was living in, taking in everything that I had done to make the base house with its plain white walls a home for Christopher and myself. The dining set that he had argued with me over but let me get my way. Our wedding photo was on the small desk by the entry that had been his childhood desk, and I had refinished it. The area rug that I surprised him with because I remembered that he liked it when we were out one day. I would have to find a new building to make a new home. A home without Christopher. Would I even be able to stay in the area? Home prices were beyond what a small bakery salary could afford, even with life insurance. The reality of my situation hit me afresh. My heart physically hurt in my chest. I pulled the throw around me and let myself give in to the tears.

Chapter 5

The fresh air came in through my open car windows, reviving me after a long week. The air had that ozone smell that comes after a rainfall. But the sun was out now; the rain had passed a while ago. It bolstered me on my drive to my mother’s. I wasn’t sure how this weekend was

going to go. Our last conversation had ended on a positive note, but not before her inevitable slip into criticism. Still, I was looking forward to being pampered for a few days. I wouldn't have to look at all the reminders of Chris, and I wouldn't have to cook or clean.

I love this drive. My mom lives in a semi-rural area on Vashon Island. After the ferry ride, I drove the small road, curving around trees and hills. I let my foot off the gas and soaked in the view. Trees gave way to the ocean. The tang of saltwater mingled with the smell of rain. I inhaled deeply. The road came to a rise, and I saw the mailbox for my mom's house. Her home sits away from the road with a view overlooking the water. I turned into her driveway and told myself, "You're braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think." So, what if I got my inspiration from Christopher Robin? You could do worse.

I stopped my car in front of the garage. I knew that she wouldn't come out to meet me. She was probably in her office working on paperwork. She would put it aside when I came in, but she was always busy at some point in the home selling or buying process. I got out of the car and stretched. It felt good to be here. We had moved to this house while I was in my early teens. I had a lot of good memories here. I got married on the back lawn.

My mom's hydrangeas lined the walkway to the front door. They were in full bloom with a riot of blues, pinks, and lavenders vying for attention. The effect softened the imposing front entryway. Double mahogany doors with leaded glass inserts stood proudly in a two-story brick entryway. They were unlocked. She was expecting me.

I walked into the foyer just as my mother came around the corner toward me. "Well, hello, Hope! I didn't expect you so soon. How was the drive? Let's get your bags."

"The hydrangeas are gorgeous, Mom," I said as we walked toward my car. "Did you find a better food for them like you wanted to?"

“Mrs. Detter up the road gave me some of her horse manure. I spread it around earlier in the season. They seem to love it. And the smell wasn’t as bad as our compost pile. I’m thrilled with them this year.”

After grabbing my bag from the trunk and closing the lid, Mom pulled my suitcase back into the foyer and left it by the side hall. She put her hand on my shoulder. “Hope, I’m really glad you came for a visit.” I turned back to look at her. She had a melancholy expression on her face that I couldn’t quite read.

“So am I, Mom.”

~

We sat on the back patio overlooking the water. In the distance, I could see a submarine making its way out toward the sea. They didn’t come into our area often, but I loved watching them glide through the water with their silhouette against the far coast. We had just finished breakfast, and Mom sipped the last of her coffee while I sipped herbal tea. There was just enough chill in the morning air that I had a sweatshirt pulled on over my pajamas and fuzzy slippers on my feet. But the sun shone brightly, and it promised to be a beautiful day.

“Is there anything specific that you want to do today, Hope? I thought we might go down to the farmers market and get some things for dinner. And maybe go to Wiser’s.” Wiser’s was the local bookstore. I could usually spend hours there browsing through the cooking section.

I turned from watching the water to look at my mom. She was beautiful in an elegant way. Her hair was pulled back into a classic chignon with a few tendrils around her face. “That sounds wonderful, Mom. But first, can I ask you some questions?”

I could see that this made her uncomfortable. She shifted in her seat. I felt like she knew that a discussion about my childhood was coming ever since I had told her of my pregnancy. She

had been elated in her own quiet way. Never too demonstrative, there had actually been a small squeal of delight.

“Of course, you can ask anything, Hope. What’s on your mind?” She set her coffee cup down, giving me her full attention.

“I know it’s been a long time, and it never seemed important before, but I can’t help but think about when Dad died. I was so young, but I have good memories of him. I remember us going to a park and him reading me bedtime stories. My baby won’t even have that,” I said with a catch in my throat. “But what I’m really freaking out about is doing this all on my own. I was supposed to go back to culinary school or work my way up in a larger bakery over time. I don’t remember us struggling when I was little. How did you do it all? How did you decide to become a realtor? I’m wondering if I shouldn’t change my career goals to something better for being a single mom.” Anxiety started building in my chest. There was a slight cramp in my stomach. I consciously took in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

There was silence for a few minutes while Mom gathered her thoughts. I let the silence sit unhindered, waiting for her to speak. She looked out at the water and then back toward me.

“First of all, Hope, I wasn’t as young as you are now when your father died. And we lived a comfortable life with him as a bank manager. I think I was almost thirty, and you were getting ready to start school. Times had changed from when I was growing up. It was common for women to have a career, and I was thinking about finding something to occupy my time.” She paused, and I could tell she had gone back in time to when I was five years old.

“I wasn’t interested in spending a long time in school,” she continued. “The bank had given me a small sum at your father’s death, and we had a small savings that would carry us for a while. I had a friend whose husband was a realtor. He said that I could be making a decent salary

within a few months. So, we lived very frugally while you entered kindergarten, and I studied for the realtor exam. He was right. With his guidance, I was making enough to pay our bills within a few months. And after saving for a few years and with good money management, we ended up here.”

Mom paused to reflect on what she had just said. I took a few sips of my tea, not wanting to rush the moment. My dad dying had left her in a completely different place than Christopher dying. I wasn't really encouraged by her story.

“The thing is, Hope, is that you have support here. I know it's not your wish, but you're always welcome to come home for a while.” She cleared her throat. “I know I don't always seem supportive, and I can be very focused on certain things, but you wouldn't have to worry about rent. You could focus on returning to school if that's what you want.” She looked at me expectantly.

I tried to keep my eyes from giving anything away. Mom was rarely vulnerable, so this was a big admission from her. I also knew that having myself and a newborn would be a major disruption to her lifestyle. It would be a major disruption to *my* lifestyle. But I didn't want to burn a bridge.

“Mom, I appreciate what you've said so much. Thank you for being here for me. I honestly don't know what I'm going to do yet, but it's nice to know that I have options. Can I think about this and get back to you? I still have time in base housing.” I acknowledged her vulnerability by offering my own. I took a shuddering breath while I tried to control my emotions. “And I'm not quite ready to say goodbye to the home I had with Christopher.”

“I understand, Hope. But I never want you to feel like you're alone in this. You're going to have a baby, and I'm going to have a grandbaby. That is a wonderful thing.”

She was right. I couldn't let the rest of my circumstances overshadow the fact that Christopher and I had created life. And that life was to be cherished. For perhaps the first time since I'd discovered that I was pregnant, my spirits lifted and I smiled inside thinking about this baby. He or she would be so very loved.

~

I arrived back at my home Sunday evening feeling cautiously optimistic. I needed to seriously consider my options for the future, but for now, I was content to come home and get ready for work in the morning.

The car came to a rest in my driveway. Sun shone down on the small house. I took it as a sign that everything was going to be all right. I got out of the car and went around to the trunk to get my overnight bag.

"What are you humming, Hope?" Stacy asked, appearing from nowhere. I almost dropped the bag before closing the trunk lid. A cloud of unease overshadowed the lightness that I had been feeling. My stomach was a churning sea. But I wanted to remain strong in front of this shark.

"Oh, was I humming?" I asked. I kept walking toward the front door.

"Well, I wouldn't be in such a good mood if I were you," Stacy said as she hunted me up the steps to my porch. "I have something to tell you."

"Does it have to be right now, Stacy? I need to get ready for work in the morning. I start early at the bakery tomorrow."

I pulled out my keys and looked at her pointedly.

“Well, if it were me, I would want to know that my husband was cheating on me,” she said with her nose in the air. “I keep hearing this around the base, Hope. Today I heard it at our group tea. The talk is getting quite alarming. I was just trying to give you a heads up.”

Why did she have to be here? Why did she have to say all this about Christopher? Surely, it wasn't true. The world started to get dark around me, and I could only see a pinpoint of light. My gut started to spasm. I grabbed the railing of my front steps and stopped walking. I slowly turned toward Stacy. I spoke deliberately. “I’m not sure why you’re so eager to share rumors. No good can come of it. I don’t want you to mention it again, Stacy. I don’t care if you have good intentions or you’re playing some sick game. I don’t want to hear it.” I turned back up the steps and unlocked my front door. I walked into the house and closed the door behind me, not bothering to look back or say another word.

I dropped my bag on the floor and made my way to the couch. My stomach was still cramping. The sunlight coming in through the windows brought me no warmth.

Chapter 6

Someone was punching me in the gut. I awoke to a cold sweat and intense pain. It came in waves and brought nausea with it. The sheets were twisted around me, and I had a hard time working my way out of them to reach the bathroom before I vomited. I made it, but just barely. I curled up on the linoleum floor as another intense pain grabbed my insides with a vice. It was so bad that it made me wet myself. I could barely move, but I knew that I needed help. I crawled back to the bedroom where my phone was on the bedside table. But who should I call? I never

got sick like this. Did I eat something bad? I hit redial and my mom's picture popped up on the screen as I heard her phone ringing.

"Hope? What's wrong? It's two in the morning."

"Mom." Another grip of the vice and I was panting. "I don't feel well. I'm throwing up and my insides keep squeezing. I think I wet myself."

I heard her sharp intake of breath, followed by a conscious deep breath before she spoke.

"Hope, have you used the restroom? I know this is awkward, but please check your underwear."

Unsure what point she was trying to make, I did what she asked, as I couldn't think enough to question her. "Oh my god, Mom. There's blood. A lot of blood."

"Hope, stay with me. I'm going to call 911 and send them to your house, ok?"

"Mom, mom. Help me." Another wave rolled over me, and I couldn't talk. I heard her muffled talking on what must be the home phone. Every couple of minutes she came back to me and said, "Hope, I'm right here. Help is coming."

I lay there on the bedroom floor until I heard someone at the door. But I couldn't move, so I just waited until I heard them come around the back. I usually forgot to lock the back door after sitting on the deck.

"Hello? Is there a Hope Diaz here? Ma'am, we're the paramedics. We're coming in, ok?"

"I'm in the bedroom," I whispered.

"Hope, are they there?" my mom asked. "Stay with me until they say which hospital they're taking you to. I'll meet you there."

A big, burly man and a short, petite woman entered the bedroom. I would have laughed at the odd coupling under other circumstances. But all I could do was groan and clench my stomach.

~

My mom held my hand. She never did that. I opened my eyes and looked at her. She looked awful. She was wearing a jogging suit, and her normally perfect hair was bedraggled and un-styled, falling across her face. She slumped in a dining room chair that she must have brought into my bedroom with her chin on her chest, softly snoring.

And then it all came rushing back. The paramedics. The hospital. Losing my baby.

Suddenly, it was too much. My chest heaved, but no sound came out. I had lost everything. Christopher was gone. And now the baby, that I had just started to be hopeful for, was gone. Ice picks plunged into my head and my heart.

My silent sobs woke my mother. She held my hand in both of hers, tears started sliding down her cheeks. She didn't say anything. After all, what was there to say?

We stayed that way for what seemed like hours. I'm sure that it was only minutes, but the grief settled on us both like a heavy blanket and remained.

~

Mom had promised to come back in the evening. She had a few things to do in the office. I couldn't blame her. She had been with me for two days, not leaving my side, even when I had insisted that I would rather be at home instead of her house. There was nothing wrong with me and no reason that she needed to be with me. Except that she *had* needed to be with me. And, in a strange turn of events, I had needed her, too.

The quiet of the house was too much. I walked to the back patio and sat in a lounge chair. It was unusually warm and sunny for the Pacific Northwest. Normally I would be out hiking or strolling downtown Seattle. But who was I kidding? Would anything be normal again?

~

It had been a week since my trip to the hospital. Mom had to go back to work, and the bakery had been very understanding about not coming in to work for a few weeks. But that had left me home alone with nothing to do but wallow, which is how I found myself agreeing to spend the weekend with Regan and her two kids. I had never met them before and wasn't sure what to expect for the weekend. I shouldn't have worried. Regan smoothed everything over immediately.

Regan, a curly-haired teenage girl, and a gangly teen boy, stood waiting on the porch as I drove up the house. Regan came running down the steps to enfold me in a super-tight hug. She wouldn't let me go. She rocked me back and forth until the girl said, "Mom, let her breathe, why don't you?"

Regan released me and laughed at herself. "I'm sorry, Hope. I'm just so glad that you're here! This is my daughter Andi and my son Matt. We don't have anything on the agenda this weekend, which is strange for us. But that means that we can do whatever we want! I've told the kids to take it easy on us, though." Her laugh lifted my spirits ever so slightly.

"Thank you for having me this weekend. It really means a lot," I said, my voice slightly catching.

"We love company. It's like an adventure. It comes from being a military family. We may ask you a bunch of questions because we love to hear everyone's story. But you don't have to talk if you don't feel like it," Andi said. "Mom said you've lived here for a long time, so we don't have to do all the stuff tourists want to do. We can do the cool stuff instead."

"Let's grab your bags and get you settled. Then we'll have some iced tea and talk about our plans," Regan said.

The boy walked up and handed me a small bouquet of wildflowers tied with a small ribbon. I hadn't seen that he had been holding it. "I'm glad you came to be with us. And I'm sorry about everything," Matt said. He didn't look me in the eye, which made me feel a bit better as my eyes welled with tears. He walked over to my car and grabbed my case from the trunk.

Regan put her hand on my shoulder as she steered me into the house. "He's tender toward others who have lost loved ones in the military, especially when he heard you lost your baby, too. He wanted to cheer you up," Regan whispered as we walked.

I was overwhelmed with the love that this family was showing me. So different from what I had experienced growing up. Regan had clearly done a fantastic job being there for her kids and helping them through their own grief when their dad died.

Their home was a typical four-level home in the Pacific Northwest. But the views made it spectacular. The family room and dining room had a beautiful view of Mt. Rainier, still covered in snow in the summer. "Wow!" I exclaimed.

"I know. We never get tired of looking out the windows. We don't have a water view like so many in this area, but we think that our view is special. It reminds us that God is always near. You know...I lift up my eyes to the mountains, where does my help come from?"

I just looked at Regan with my mouth hanging ever-so-slightly open. I think she thought I was still in awe of the mountain and didn't understand what she was saying.

"That's from Psalm 121," she said.

"I know," I replied. "It's just that that is my favorite verse. I read it once in a book, and it has always kind of stuck with me. I think it's weird that you would quote it now."

"Oh, nothing weird about it," she laughed, then winked at me. "Definitely on purpose." I couldn't help but feel that there was hope for me. I hadn't even been there for ten minutes, but I

could feel the weight of my grief blanket lifting ever so slightly. “You’re going to love the view from your room, too. And there’s a little balcony that you can sit out on.” She led me up the stairs and to a small room, but she was right. The view was truly spectacular. French doors opened onto the small deck with an Adirondack chair and side table. A blanket lay across the back of the chair, perfect for cuddling up to look at the view.

Chapter 7

I held the cup of tea up to my nose, and the steam tickled my nostrils. Robins called to each other in the trees as the sun came up and turned Mount Rainier a soft pink. I pulled the down blanket tighter around my legs to keep the cool air off the backs of my legs. I sighed.

Regan’s home was so peaceful. I knew how hard-won that peace was. I didn’t have any peace. I didn’t have my baby. I didn’t have Christopher. I was going to lose my home. Yet none of those things could truly explain the lack of peace that I felt. I didn’t really know what I wanted. I had been content to coast and support Chris in his work. I never pushed myself to go to culinary school or to have a career. It seemed that there would be time for that later. My main goal had been to enjoy being with my husband. *Where does that leave me now?*

I thought back to my childhood, which didn’t seem that long ago. I enjoyed dance and reading books, and, of course, baking, although that had only been a means to an end. I always had a sweet tooth. I read books to escape my loneliness, have other families, and be different people. I was often by myself while Mom showed houses after dinner or worked in her office, although she kept weekends sacred and was always there for important events like dance recitals or school functions.

So, it wasn't the being alone part that stole my peace. I was used to long stretches of "me time." I guessed that it was the lack of personal vision or having any goals. I had completely wrapped my life around Christopher's. I had been floating down a river and suddenly found myself on the north pole. I could go in any direction. I almost had too many options while I felt that I had none. I just needed to put my foot in one direction and start walking.

~

"Thanks for recommending the almond tea, Hope. It's delicious!" Andi said. "I never would have thought to try it. I didn't even see it on the menu."

"You're welcome," I said. "I'm so glad you had the idea to come down here. I've never been to the Jimmi Hendrix statue. And I'm always happy to go to a bookstore!"

We had decided to spend the day in the Capitol Hill area, wandering stores and having lunch. We had just left a bubble tea shop and were walking toward The Elliott Bay Book Company and the Jimmi Hendrix statue to take pictures. It couldn't have been a better day. The sunny but cool morning had warmed to a picture postcard day in Seattle. Locals were out and about doing their weekend shopping or grabbing coffees. It wasn't too crowded to enjoy the sunshine.

"What kind of books do you like, Hope?" asked Matt. He and Regan walked behind Andi and me.

"Oh, I grew up reading things like Winnie the Pooh. That's still my favorite book. My dad would read it to me while I sat on his lap. Then I suppose that I read most things kids my age read. I haven't been reading a lot of fiction lately, but I love a good romance or bestseller. I've been reading a lot of trade magazines—stuff for bakers and owning bakeries. I think I'm going to look for a good novel. What are you looking for, Matt?"

“I still love comics. And I’ve really been enjoying biographies about explorers. There’s a book about the Mount Everest climb in 1996 that I’m looking for.”

“Okay, here we are,” Regan said as she opened the door to the bookshop. We all walked in. “What do you say we meet back here in an hour to check in?”

Everyone agreed, although Andi made a comment about that not being enough time. “It’s just a check-in,” Regan said. “We can reassess then.” Everyone went their own way, leaving me to wander. I hadn’t been to this bookstore in a long time. Andi was right. An hour might not be long enough. I decided to start upstairs in the bargain books. I would work my way down and end with the paper products. I wanted to get some new stationery.

I browsed the books and grabbed Susan Meissner’s new novel, hopeful that her compelling writing would pull me in. I found some beautiful cards with daisies on them in the paper goods and gift section. Then I worked my way over toward the magazines. I still had twenty minutes until we were supposed to meet. Magazines seemed to be more interesting lately. I hadn’t been able to read anything of length or that required concentration. I found a magazine on interior design, one on gardening, and a new baking magazine. I made my way to the checkout counter to find Matt waiting in line, too.

“Did you find anything, Matt?” I asked, shifting my load to my other arm.

“I found the book about Mt. Everest.” He held up a book for me to see. *Into Thin Air* by Jon Krakauer. I hadn’t read it before. “Here, do you want to read the back?” Matt asked, handing me the book.

I took the book and read the back. “That sounds like a devastating story,” I said.

“Yeah, but it happened. There’s a lot of arguing about what happened up there. Other people say that his story isn’t completely accurate. I want to read it and see what I think. What did you find?” he asked.

I showed him my treasures. After checking out, we headed toward the front of the store. Regan joined us, showing us her new travel books. “This is the year that I’m going to start planning my dream vacation,” she said. “I’ve always wanted to go to Hawaii, but I’ve never been. I need to decide which island I should go to, where to stay, and what to do. I think I’m going to go next spring. It’s about time I start getting adventurous again!” Her eyes twinkled with the joy of anticipation. It dawned on me that for all of her support, Regan was still healing, too. I had only seen her through the lens of my own pain and want, not thinking of the grief that she bore or what it cost her to be a mentor to me. The weight of this realization caused a lump to grow in my throat.

“Hope, are you okay? Do we need to leave?” Regan asked. She must have sensed my mood change.

I smiled in spite of the awareness of my self-centeredness. “Regan, you’re the best. I’m so sorry that I’ve only been selfish with our time together. I only talk about me. Can you forgive me? I think that it’s so wonderful that you’re going to go to Hawaii. I think that you should do more things for yourself. You deserve it.”

Suddenly, her arms were around me, and we were hugging each other and laughing and crying at the same time. Poor Matt just stood there awkwardly as we made a scene in front of the store.

It was Sunday morning, and Andi and Matt had gone to meet some friends for coffee and then church. Regan and I sat on the back deck, sipping our drinks, admiring the view, and reading in companionable silence, she with her travel books, and I with my magazines. I had already looked through the gardening magazine. I flipped through the baking magazine to see if anything caught my eye. I was weird like that. I didn't read from cover to cover but browsed until something sparked my interest. In this case, I made it all the way to the back before I paused.

I couldn't believe what I saw. Gabriel Barlowe was still looking for an apprentice baker. I turned the magazine over to look at the date on the cover to make sure that I hadn't inadvertently picked up an older magazine. It was the current issue. I went back to the ad in the back. It was true. It didn't say that he hadn't hired anyone yet, but this was an up-to-date ad. I looked over the qualifications and start date. The minimum was two years of baking experience, and I had that. The start date said, "When filled."

Once again, sensing a shift in my demeanor, Regan leaned over and said, "Everything okay?"

"Yes," I breathed. "There's a job opening. I studied with him. I don't know if I can do it."

"Hope, focus. What job? Who are you talking about? What can't you do?"

I stopped thinking and took a deep breath. "I'm sorry. I was just overwhelmed. Let me start at the beginning." I told Regan about when I was taking baking classes and how Gabriel Barlowe came and was a guest lecturer at my school. He stayed for two weeks and taught on croissants. I shared how I got my love of pastry from him and how I had seen that he was looking for an apprentice a while ago, but I had just found out that I was pregnant. I couldn't possibly think about moving to England. And here was another ad for the job in the back of the baking

magazine. “The thing is, I can’t believe that he hasn’t found anyone yet. He is well-known in the baking community, but especially in Europe. He has his own bakery in a small town in England now, after years of traveling and teaching. It would be amazing to learn more from him.”

I got lost in my thoughts again, so much so that I was surprised to hear Regan talking. “Well, why don’t you apply? It sounds like an amazing adventure. What if he hasn’t hired anyone yet because the job is meant for you?”

That was something that I had not considered. In fact, that was not my usual way of thinking at all. I never thought about things being “meant for me.” They either worked out, or they didn’t. I looked at Regan closely. “What do you mean?”

“What if no one has gotten the job because God has planned it for you? After everything that you’ve been through, now seems like the perfect time to begin again. And maybe a change of scenery wouldn’t hurt.” Regan’s voice got soft. “When Bryan died, all I wanted to do was run away and start over somewhere. Somewhere the memories didn’t assault me every time I turned around. But I had the kids, and they were comforted by being in the familiar. So, I stayed. And now I’m happy here in our home. But you’re young. And while it’s cliché, you have a wide-open future. You can do anything. Perhaps this opportunity might bring some clarity on that future.”

I listened to what she said and let my thoughts run their course. “What would you have done if you didn’t have the kids?” I asked.

“I was already a nurse, but I might have moved somewhere else. Perhaps to New England or somewhere warm. I might have thought about Hawaii.” She gave a light laugh. “But Hope, this is about you right now. Let me just ask you these things. Do you want to continue baking? Is anything holding you here? Do you feel a strong pull to do something else? Or are you afraid of succeeding?”

I sat on that for a bit, and, to her credit Regan didn't rush me. "I think that I've been feeling unsettled exactly because of those questions. It seems to go deeper than just the grief of losing Christopher and the baby. I've had to think about *me*. And I don't know. I don't know what *I* want. I was content being with Chris. Is it wrong to be anxious and excited at the same time?"

Regan looked out at the sun shining down on Mt. Rainier. A magpie flew into the yard and started dancing around on the grass. She looked back at me. "I would say that there is no rulebook for grief. Losing things in life are sad, but there is also the opportunity to fill the space of what you lost with something great in its own right." She paused. "What if you applied? It doesn't mean that you'll get the job. Or even that you have to take it if it's offered. It just means that you're open to the possibility."

I looked at Regan. Her face was kind, and her smile encouraging. My heart started to beat quickly as I listened and thought about what this job might mean. "I think I might be," I replied. The magpie flew off toward the mountain.

Chapter 8

I repositioned my hair into a higher ponytail and put my hat back on. The sweat on the back of my neck dried in the cool breeze as I walked to Starbucks for a treat after running around Green Lake. I looked around as I stopped to grab my wallet from my car, and even though it was morning, families were beginning to set up blankets on the grass beside the lake. It promised to be a gorgeous day. The endorphins were flowing happily through my system after my exercise, and I couldn't have chosen a better day.

After grabbing an iced chai latte, I headed back to the park and plopped myself down on the grass away from the families and closer to the water. I leaned back on my elbows, closed my eyes, and let the sun's warmth lift my spirits even more. I had come to this moment on purpose and with peace. I pulled Christopher's letter out of my waist belt and smoothed the creases out of the envelope. I wanted to know what his last words to me were more than I was afraid of the grief.

When I opened my eyes, the sun glinted off the water like diamonds in a spectacular display of optimism. I took in a deep breath through my nose, smelling the warming grass and tang of the lake. I wanted to remember this moment. Remember that I was warm and hopeful. I slit the envelope with my finger and pulled out a couple of pages. I smelled the paper, hoping to smell something of Chris. It was just paper. His looping writing filled the paper.

Dear Hope,

First, I hope that you're doing well and staying busy. I want you to know how much I love you. You have always been and will always be the treasure of my heart. Your joy in life lifts me up out of my normal frenzy and into someplace beautiful. I live for the moments that we are together but work for our future with all of my strength. Speaking of the future, I want to talk to you about that. I know that you've been happy with your work at the bakery, but I think that it's time you stretched your wings a bit. I want you to think about going to culinary school or maybe starting out on your own, maybe with orders or something. I really appreciate how you've put my career first, but I want you to think about what you need and want to do. Love you, baby.

Now, I have to tell you something that might upset you. Before I left, Stacy came over while you were working one day. Just thinking that she wanted something from the

kitchen, I just let her in. I'm sorry, baby, but she didn't want something from the kitchen. She threw herself at me and started taking off her clothes. Of course, I told her to get out in no uncertain terms. I even went outside so she could put her shirt back on. I didn't know how to tell you, and with getting ready for the deployment, I didn't. I let it go. I did tell Doug when we got out here. I guess they've been having problems. Stacy told Doug all about it in an attempt to make him jealous. But now Doug tells me that Stacy is going crazy and wants to upset you by making up stories about me. Baby, there's no truth to whatever she tells you. I just told you what happened. I need you to forgive me for not telling you sooner. I didn't want our last moments to be about that girl. Please forgive me and know that there is no other woman for me. You're my everything.

Things are heating up around here. There's a group that really wants to cause problems. Don't worry. I'm being safe. Just say a prayer for all of us.

Well, I gotta go. I'll mail this after patrol. Counting down the days until we're together again. Love you, baby.

Chris.

Tears streamed down my face as I blew my nose into a Starbucks napkin. I was both happy and sad. I had read his letter. His last one. But it was so like Christopher, I could hear everything in his voice, that I treasured it. It let me be with him one last time. I clutched the letter to my heart and just looked out at the water. At the place where he proposed to me. And I loved him. I loved him for how he always made me the center of everything. I loved him for how he was so open about his feelings and always cherished mine. He was one in a million, and he was mine. He would always be my Christopher. I smiled in spite of my tears.

So, that Stacy was a crazy lady. I already knew that, but it explained so much. I couldn't even be mad at Chris for not telling me. We had loved each other well before he left. I had no regrets there. She would have mucked it up had I known. I felt sorry for her. What kind of sick person made someone doubt their husband's fidelity after he died? Ugh. I needed to get away from her.

But more precious to me were Chris's words about going back to school or baking on my own. It's almost like he knew that I was going to need to find work that was more fulfilling. He was always taking care of me, even after he was gone. I knew then that I was going to have to submit an application to work with Gabriel. I had to at least try. It's what Chris would have wanted.

~

Dear Ms. Diaz,

Mr. Barlowe would be happy to offer you the position of apprentice baker. Per your interview with Mr. Barlow, he will expect you at work August 15th. If you decide not to take the position, please let us know by August 1st.

Enclosed you will find the necessary work forms and certificate of sponsorship to obtain your work visa. Processing time has been around three weeks. Your work start date, in six weeks, allows for three weeks of lag. If you have not received this one week prior to your start date, please let us know immediately.

Sincerely,

Ava Spence

Personal Assistant to Gabriel Barlowe

PS- Mr. Barlowe says that he sincerely hopes you are gentler on your dough.

~

The last box was packed and in the shipping container, and the cleaners were working in the kitchen. I looked around at what had been my home for the last two years. So many memories. I would always treasure this place: just a simple home, but it had been my first and only home with Chris.

My mom walked into the living room. “Everything is out of the bathroom. I put your last few things that were on the counter into your toiletry case. Do you want me to put your things into my car now?”

I had already sold my car and been living with my mom for the last couple of days. Everything happened in such a whirlwind. I even had my work visa from the UK; it had come in only two and a half weeks. I had sent ahead my unaccompanied baggage, things that I would want to be at my new home ahead of me. My new landlord agreed to sign for it and make sure that it was set up. I had found a cute apartment in an old converted barn. It had four apartments and wasn't far from where I would be working.

All I had left to do was the base housing inspection in the morning, and then I would be on a plane to England tomorrow night. “That would be great, Mom. Why don't we take a walk around the neighborhood while they finish cleaning? Then we can go meet Regan and her kids for dinner.”

~

The waitress said, “Say cheese,” and took our picture.

“Now a funny one! Rabbit ears,” said Matt. The waitress took another photo and handed me back my phone. This was a moment that I would want to remember forever. I looked at the

pictures. They had captured us all perfectly. My mother in her elegant suit and perfectly done hair. Regan with her curls tied back, but escaping nonetheless. Andi was on the verge of being an adult. She was almost my age. Matt with his tender but boyish grin. And me. Not alone and yet leaving my whole world to start something new.

I had been feeling a little blue about everything recently. It seemed as if reading Christopher's letter and deciding to move brought a fresh wave of grief. I was told that this was normal. My grief group had been supportive and hopeful. I was ready to be hopeful. I just wasn't sure that I was there yet.

Chapter 9

My neck was stiff, and I could feel fuzz on my teeth. Thirteen hours of traveling made me feel like a shaggy dog that had been living on the streets. I longed for a shower to wash the travel grime away. But my journey wasn't over yet. I had been sent instructions to take a train from London Heathrow Airport to a transfer station and then another train to Cambridge. From there, one of my new neighbors would pick me up and drive me to my new home. I still had about three hours of travel left.

When the plane arrived at the gate, I stood up and reached for my overhead bag. Everyone was in a hurry to get off the airplane. I had two hours before my train, so I wasn't in a hurry, but it felt good to stretch. I followed the people in front of me through the gate to customs. I left customs and entered the main terminal. I washed my face and brushed my hair in the restroom, or loo as they called it here. I gargled some mouthwash to free the fuzz from my teeth. Feeling halfway human and less like the lost dog, I looked at the map and the directions I had

been sent. I figured out my path and then focused on finding food. There was a Pret-A-Manger, a small café-type shop that sold drinks and quick sandwiches, on the way to the trains. I looked at the sandwiches in the cooler and grabbed something that didn't sound too weird to me: a chicken curry. I stood in line to pay. Despite all of the travelers, the line moved quickly, and I had time to look at the drink menu. They had coffee, but I had never liked the bitter brew. I ordered an English Breakfast tea with sugar and cream and tried not to giggle when the boy behind the counter said, "That'll be nine pounds fifty, love," in his British accent. I was going to love listening to people talk here.

I found a seat and thought about everything I still had to do to get to my new apartment. It was in a renovated barn and had four flats within the building. Two up and two down. Mine was the smaller one upstairs. The landlady had told me there was an American couple in the building with a little girl and another single American lady. There was also a single British lady. She had the smaller apartment downstairs. It sounded like a good way to ease into British life. She assured me that the Americans were friendly, and the couple taught at the school on the American military base nearby while the single American was in the military. I was secretly glad that I was going to have some people close by that would understand me a bit better.

I sipped my tea and watched people walk by on their way to their destinations. I noticed that a lot of the women wore skirts and flats and shirts that might or might not match. Fashion didn't seem to be as strict here as it was in Seattle. There you either had jeans and down vests or elegant business attire. I was also secretly glad that I was moving in the summer. I had heard about the fog and the bone-deep cold of winter, but now it was a balmy seventy degrees outside, according to the pilot's announcement. I had also changed into a sundress and sweater in the restroom, along with some sandals. The skylights made the airport feel like a downtown square

rather than a waiting place. The chicken curry sandwich wasn't bad, but the non-sleeping on the plane really made me want to find a quiet floor and just go to sleep. I don't know how anyone slept sitting up. Thankfully, my mother had made me get one of those travel neck pillows, and the kink in my neck wasn't as bad as it could have been, and my head didn't keep bobbing in the middle of the flight while I tried to sleep. Still, I felt like I had been through twenty rounds of boxing with the accompanying aches and fatigue.

I got up to throw my trash in the bin and began making my way downstairs to catch the train. I would have one change to another train not far outside London before making my way to the northeast. It felt good to get my body moving again.

I took the escalator down to the lower level, where I could find the tube station. I felt the chill of the air as the trains whooshed past as I looked to make sure that I was on the right one. Apparently, there is only one train out of Heathrow into London. I couldn't miss it. I stood on the platform and waited for the next one, taking care not to get too close to the yellow paint that was on the edge. The rails were about six to seven feet down, and I was nervous being so close to the edge. I adjusted my shoulder bag to try to keep it from digging in. I could feel the platform rumble as the next train came into the station. "Mind the gap," the train said as the doors opened and people with suitcases got off. Thankfully, there weren't a lot of people waiting to get on. I stepped onto the train and found a seat. They were hard plastic seats covered with a wild blue, yellow, and red fabric. I sat down and put my bag on my lap. Across from me and above the windows, there were advertisements for plays downtown and a new perfume by someone I didn't recognize. The train lurched, and I was leaving the airport.

I pulled out my notes to remind myself which station I needed to get off to make the transfer to the other train. I was on the Piccadilly train, and I had to get off at the King's Cross

station. From there, I would take the Great Northern train on to Cambridge, which was the closest major station to my new home. The tube map in between the advertisements across from me showed that it was about a dozen stops. My notes said that it would take about an hour. I settled in, trying not to give in to the waves of exhaustion as they swept over me. The tea wasn't helping me stay alert.

I managed to stay awake by watching people getting off and on the train. I changed trains seamlessly and managed to find another seat available. It would be another hour, so I took out the magazines that I had brought with me in my satchel. Eventually, the train left the underground, and I put the magazines back into my bag to watch the countryside go by. At first, it went through the outskirts of London, with graffiti on the cement walls near the stops. It then gave way to large stretches of green countryside with small towns in between. I was taken by how rural the country was not far outside of a large city like London. At home in Seattle, the countryside didn't seem that close to the city. I saw green fields with a lot of sheep. I didn't know that there were so many sheep in England. They seemed to be in all of the fields that the train went by.

I overheard two older ladies. "I can't believe how beastly it is this summer. I'm half a mind to go down to Edwards in Cornwall and plant myself on the beach. At least the breezes there are cooler," one said.

"Well, I'm of a mind to move up north to my cousin's place in Edinburgh. He asks me every year. And he's certainly got the room," the other replied. It *was* stuffy on the train. All of the stops kept the warm air coming in, although it didn't seem that there was any air conditioning anyway. I enjoyed the warmth, but coming from Seattle, it did seem toasty to me as well.

Eventually, it was my stop. I got off the train and followed everyone else. Steps led up from the train platform to the station's parking lot. My notes said to walk toward the end of the sidewalk toward the parking exit and wait for a blue Citroen to pull up. I wasn't sure what that was, but I was waiting for a blue car. The train was right on time, so I hoped that I didn't have to wait long.

I didn't, but I was taken aback when the car approached from the opposite direction of what I was expecting. The car stopped, and a red-headed lady jumped out of the car. She was very tall and maybe about fifteen years older than me. "Hi, love. You must be Hope. I just knew right away that it was you. I'm Madeleine. Come on then; you must be knackered." She walked around the car and let me in. It felt strange sitting on the left side of the car without a steering wheel. She took my bag and put it in the backseat before getting back into the car. "Did you have a good trip? It must have taken you all day. Well, all night, then. It's not too far to the Barn. Your shipment came, and I hope you don't mind, but we tried to make it cozy for you. There are fresh linens on the bed, and we put some basics in the fridge. Eggs and milk and bread and some jam."

"Hi, yes, I'm Hope, obviously. That was so kind of you. Of course, I don't mind. It will be so wonderful to get into bed right away. I'm exhausted," I replied.

"Well, of course, you are. You just sit back and let me talk. I'm good at it, and we'll be there in no time. Besides you and me, there is another woman at the Barn. Her name is Debbi. She works on the military base. She's a nurse at the hospital. Labor and delivery. And then there's Bill and Edie. Bill teaches at the high school on the base. And his wife, Edie, teaches at a local daycare center. They have a two-year-old daughter named Daisy. She goes to the daycare Edie works at. And now here you are. I guess I'm the only Brit in the Barn now. Henry used to

have your place. But he up and left one day to move to Spain. Said he couldn't stand the cold and wanted to retire someplace warm. You'll love your place, though. It's small, but it has the best corner windows. I have the same windows, but I don't get as much sun on the bottom. It's a beautiful conversion. I hope you're happy there. Most people seem to like it and stay. Which is nice, we don't get much turnover, and so we've all become kind of like a little family. We all watch over Daisy, and everyone loves to play with my little girl, GiGi. She's my dog. A little Yorkie. She loves everyone. Do you like dogs?"

"I do," I answered. Before I had time to say anything else, Madeleine was talking again.

"Oh, good. I was hoping that you would. She's a real sweetheart and doesn't bark much at all. And, of course, I immediately pick up her messes. Most people in our area do. So, I don't know why they had to go and make some kind of Protection Order about it. Now it's an offense, and they can give you a ticket and make you pay a fine if you don't pick up your dog's mess. Oh, sorry, love. That's just me complaining about our local health officer. He thinks much of himself. He likes to make sure to send officers around to catch people doing this. Apparently, his neighbor would let his big poodle foul in his yard every night on their walk. He seems to know who has dogs in the area. You shouldn't even see him, though. He's eighty, but he's sweet on me and leaves our little corner alone."

"Oh, look, dear. We're coming to the main village near us. I think this is where you will be working? Our landlord said you are a baker? The bakery here is excellent—one of the best in the country. Milburn is a market town. There is a market twice a week. People come from all over to get fresh produce and meats. The sausages are the best you'll find anywhere. And the local shops have specials on market days. The bakery usually sells out by noon. They'll sure appreciate your help. Do you think that you can help me with my bread? I try to get it nice and

light, but it comes out rather flat. My recipe says that I should use warm water. Do you think it's too warm?"

I had been watching the quaint market town go by, awed by the cobbled streets and buildings that were clearly older than anything I had seen in Seattle. Each shop probably wasn't any bigger than most people's living room. "Umm. I'll have to come watch you make your bread, but if it comes out flat and heavy, you might be kneading it too much," I said.

"Oh, I don't knead it. I use the fancy mixer that I got for Christmas last year," Madeleine said.

"That's probably it, then," I said. "People want to make sure that their bread is well-mixed, but it's easy to go too long with a mixer. Let me get some rest, and I'd love to help you make your bread. It's the least that I can do for you setting up my place and picking me up today. I truly appreciate everything that you've done for me already."

"Oh, love, I said that we were like family. You're just our newest member. We'll let you settle in, but I think everyone will want to meet you tomorrow. I'm sure that after they get off work, Bill and Edie and Debbi will want to have tea with you."

"Tea?" I asked. "Like, a tea with scones and sandwiches?"

"Oh, no. Like an evening meal. We call it tea. I'm sure that it will be something simple. You'll just have to show up. I think I heard that you are looking to buy a car? Sold yours back home, right? You can check out the local webpage and see what's available. Most people around here are honest, and you should be able to find what you're looking for. You probably won't find anything too fancy, but it should be solid and get you where you need to go."

“Thank you so much! I was wondering how I was going to go about finding a car. I thought that it would be hard. Hopefully, I can find something within my budget. I don’t want anything too rich, but something reliable sounds like just what I need.”

The car came around the corner, and we pulled into a long driveway, entering through a gap in a stone wall that must be centuries old. It went back a bit, and then I saw the Barn. It was a large, two-story building in grey stone. There were ornate windows, and the roof was of grey slate that was covered in green moss. It was charming. A smile came on my face unbidden. I was going to live in an old English barn. I really couldn’t believe that this was happening to me. Christopher would have loved this. *You always wanted to travel with me. I’m here, babe. I did it. I’m following my dreams!*

Madeleine parked the car over to the side by a stone wall. There were no other cars, but I could see spaces where they should be. “We’re here! Let’s get you inside, where you can have a bath and get some sleep.” We both got out of the car, and Madeleine reached into the back to grab my bag. “If you keep going past the barn, you’ll find the manor house. You’re free to walk through the woods, but don’t go past the second gate. That’s where our landlord lives. He’s nice, but mostly keeps to himself.”

We followed a stone path that led to the front door. The door was wood, probably oak, and solid. Madeleine pulled out a key and turned the iron handle. Inside was a hallway with a staircase at the other end. On either side of the hall were paintings and some ornately carved tables with either vases or plants on them. At either side of the entrance was a door. “This door here on the right is my place. The other belongs to Bill and Edie, and Daisy. You’re upstairs just over me, and Debbi is across from you. Don’t worry about making noise. These floors are two feet thick with carpeting. I wouldn’t be able to hear you if you dropped a kettle onto the floor.”

She led the way to the staircase. It curved halfway up and continued onto another hall with doors just like below. At the end of the hall was one of the beautiful windows that I had seen from outside. My door was on the left.

Madeleine grabbed a set of keys sitting on one of the wood tables and handed them to me. “The brass skeleton key is for the outer door. The silver key is for your apartment. I’m so happy to meet you, Hope! Now get some rest. I don’t work tomorrow, so I’ll be around if you need me.” She put my bag down by the door and turned to me. Madeleine grabbed me in a hug and squeezed.

“Thank you so much for everything. I really can’t tell you how much this has meant to me. And I look forward to making bread with you.”

Madeleine smiled and waved as she walked down the hall and then down the stairs.

Chapter 10

The wide-plank wood floors gleamed in the light. Madeleine was right. The light in this apartment was amazing. There were large windows on two sides of the living area, although it was small. My sofa and coffee table sat in the middle. On the left was a door. I went over to it to see my mattress on the floor with all my bedding. The bed itself would come in the main shipment. This room had a skylight and a small window. It also had a door on the right. I walked into the bathroom. There was carpet on the floor. I laughed to myself about who would put carpet in the bathroom, but not in the living room.

That wasn’t the only strange thing. There was a large bathtub under another skylight, but there was no shower. There was a brass shower handle on the side of the tub. I guessed that I

would be washing my hair that way. Still, it was a deep, free-standing tub that looked inviting. I couldn't wait to get in and get the travel grime off of me. I turned the water on, two knobs, one for hot and one for cold, and adjusted the temperature until it was nice and warm. I saw a strange towel rack on the wall. It looked like plumbing. I flipped the red switch that I saw, and it lit up. The rack started to make noise. I pulled my towel off (I guess Madeleine had set it out) and felt warmth. *Ooh, this will be nice.* I put the towel back on the rack to warm.

While the bath filled, I walked back out into the living room, realizing that for a guest to use the toilet, they would have to walk through my bedroom. Quirky, but doable. I would have to become a meticulous housekeeper. Around the corner were my dining room table and two of my chairs. The rest would come later. Right next to that was a small kitchen area. Wood cabinets and shiny white tile counters made it inviting, but it had its quirks, too. The stove was small, and the refrigerator was not much larger than the one in my college dorm. I guessed that I would be shopping frequently. There was only me, so that would be alright. But the strangest thing was that there was a washing machine under the counter in the kitchen. A note on the counter said: *Hi Hope, this is Debbi. I know this seems strange, but this is both a washer and a dryer. The dryer part doesn't work all that great. It takes hours to dry. If you look in the broom closet, you'll find a drying rack. I recommend you do small loads and often. The heat in our flats is actually pretty good. So, it shouldn't take long for your things to dry. Except bedding. We all take it to the laundromat in the village. See you soon! Debbi*

I bent down to look at the controls, and sure enough, there were settings for both washing and drying clothes. I walked over to what must be the broom closet. Inside was a vacuum, broom, and the drying rack. I pulled it out. It was an old-fashioned accordion drying rack. The

adventure part of all this newness was starting to accentuate how tired I was. I looked around, satisfied that I would be warm and safe, and went to take that bath.

~

I woke up starving around midnight, so I turned on some lights and went into the kitchen to find food and do some more exploring. Just as Madeleine said, there were eggs, jam, cheese, and milk in the fridge. In the small pantry cupboard right next to it, I found some bread, crackers, and cereal. I now opened up all the cupboards to find paper plates and bowls and plastic cups and utensils. They had certainly thought of everything. Their kindness made me feel welcome. My own dishes and the rest of my things wouldn't be here for at least three weeks. I was told to expect four or five. I had all the basics. And I had sent a pot and pan and baking dish ahead. I could live off of paper and plastic for a few weeks. I thought the basic furniture pieces were more important than a well-stocked kitchen. I was only allowed so many pounds in this shipment.

I poured myself a bowl of cereal and sat down at my kitchen table. *Wow. I am in England!* I could see Chris sitting across the table from me, laughing and saying, "Of course you are! I knew you could do it!" Tears welled up in my eyes. *I would rather you be here with me than me living in England.*

I shook myself mentally. I let myself take in the whole apartment through fresh eyes. The warm wood floors were beautiful, and the ceilings were tall, which made the area look bigger than it was. White plaster walls were highlighted by crown molding. Because I had lived in base housing, I didn't have a lot to pare down. The apartment felt spacious but cozy. It was definitely a step up from before. There would be plenty of room for the rest of my furniture and places to hang my pictures.

I gazed at the kitchen next. It was small, but I could probably put a small table or work cart in the middle to add more counter space for meal prep. Again, the warm wood cabinets, I was pretty sure that they were pine, made everything cozy. They were good quality. I was really happy that I had found this place.

Peace swept over me. I felt like I was in the right place. I hadn't felt like this in a long time. *Thank you!*

Chapter 11

I woke up from my nap to a knock on the door. There was a note on the doormat. *Come on down to Bill and Edie's about 5.* I looked at my watch. It was 4:15. I had just enough time to jump in the shower. It had been over twenty-four hours since I had arrived. I had gone back to bed around noon. Jet lag wanted to keep me somewhere over the mid-Atlantic. Oh right. There was no shower. I got in the tub and rinsed off. I was going to have to find a way to hang a curtain or put something down on the floor. The spray wanted to go everywhere, and the carpet on the floor made it a huge mess.

I had opened the windows before I napped, and I could hear chatter coming from downstairs. I heard a little girl; that must be Daisy. It was warm, so I put on a sundress and sandals. I grabbed the apartment key and put it in my pocket, although I wasn't sure that I needed to lock up if we were all downstairs.

I skipped downstairs and knocked on what Madeleine had told me was Bill and Edie's door. A slight woman with brown hair and large brown eyes opened the door. "Hello! Welcome to the Barn! I'm Edie. Come on in."

“I’m Hope. Thank you so much for having me,” I said. I reached out a hand, and she grabbed it in both of her own.

“You are so welcome. Come on down any time you need anything. This is my husband, Bill.” A tall, lanky blonde-haired man walked up.

“Hello, Hope. We’re so glad to finally meet you.” He reached down and picked up a tow-headed toddler with bright blue eyes. “This is Daisy. She’s almost three. Can you say hi, Daisy?”

The little girl looked at me. “Hi,” she said and promptly buried her head in her father’s neck.

Madeleine walked in behind me. “Hello, Miss Daisy. Do you have a hug for Aunt Madeleine?”

Daisy immediately unburied her head and reached out her arms toward Madeleine. The girl jumped out of her dad’s arms and ran. Madeleine scooped her up. “How was your day? Did you learn something new?” Madeleine walked into the living room, conversing with Daisy.

“She’s shy at first,” said Edie. “Don’t take it personally. She’s in a stranger-danger phase. Please grab a drink and make yourself at home. I’ve only got a few things left to finish up. Debbi should be here any minute.”

Bill motioned toward the kitchen. “Let’s get you a drink, and I’ll give you the grand tour. Our place is a little different than yours.”

Already I could see that the living room and kitchen were more spacious, but because of the way the bedrooms were laid out, the living room only had one large window, whereas mine had one on two walls. They had the same wood floors, but their walls were painted a soft yellow that cheered the place up. They had a dining room in the corner like I did, but it was long,

creating room for a kitchen on the other side of the living room wall that was the same size as the living room. I hadn't seen it from the front, but the Barn must have an extension on this side.

As we went around the corner to the kitchen, Bill said, "What would you like? Water, iced tea, or a soda? We just made the sun tea today."

"That sounds wonderful," I said. "I love iced tea."

"As you can see, our side of the Barn is longer in the back, so that allows for a larger dining room and kitchen and an extra bedroom on the other side. We also have a door from the master to the garden patio." He led me back through the living room to the small hall. "The first bedroom up front is Daisy's. It gets the amazing light from the other large window in the front." Next, there was a bathroom and then Bill and Edie's bedroom.

"Wow," I gasped. The ceiling was high, and there was a set of French doors on two sides of the room.

"Yes, it's stunning. But right now, when the sun rises before 5 AM and sets right before 10 PM, it's not so great. If we're really tired, we will sleep with a mask on so that the sun doesn't wake us. At the end of the downstairs hall on the back side, there is a door that leads to the patio. Here, you can see it." He led me outside and showed me the door. The patio was brick and had an outdoor dining table and chairs. There was also an old-fashioned charcoal grill. Beyond the patio, there were trees and lawn, and then another stone wall. I could see a gate farther down where the driveway curved. "This is a common area. We can all use it. On the weekends, it usually turns into a family bbq. We all end up bringing something. Sometimes, someone will have friends over, and we all hang out. We're really relaxed here."

"I can't believe that I found this place. You all are so nice."

“Don’t believe a word he says. Bill will talk you to death about the joys of the Pythagorean Theorem.” A tall, stunning brunette stood next to me. “Hi, I’m Debbi. I’m sorry I was running a little late. Things got hectic at work. It seems the entire pregnant population on base decided to have their baby today.” Her blue eyes twinkled as she held out her hand to me.

“That must be hard,” I said, shaking her hand.

“Oh, I love it. There’s nothing like helping a little human enter the world. Welcome to the Barn!”

~

I listened intently as a lively discussion of the merits of the local Mexican food restaurant took place as we sat around the table after eating. It was about forty-five minutes away, near another small military base, and catered to the Americans. Bill was extolling the virtues of the nachos while Edie and Debbi criticized the salsa.

“I don’t think the restaurant is that great,” Madeleine said. “If you want a good Mexican restaurant, the best one I’ve found is actually in Bath.”

“That’s hours away!” exclaimed Bill.

“Yet, it’s true.” Madeleine stood. “Let me put Daisy to bed.” We had all been so busy talking that no one noticed that Daisy had fallen asleep in her high chair with her face on the tray. She gave a little start as Madeleine lifted her head and Edie pulled out the tray, but settled right in as Madeleine picked her up and headed toward her bedroom.

“Daisy adores Madeleine. She’s her favorite person. Even more than Bill and me,” said Edie.

Madeleine came back into the room and sat down. She was sitting next to me and reached over to put her hand on mine. “Hope, we’re so glad that you’re here. It seems a very brave thing to do at your age: just pack up and leave your home. What brings you here specifically?”

I looked around at the four faces looking intently at me, eagerly waiting for me to speak. *How much should I say?* They would find out one way or another. So, I told them. I told them everything—from my shaky relationship with my mom, to my love for Christopher, losing him, getting pregnant, losing the baby, and Regan and her family, my desire to get away from the base and Stacy, and in the end, everyone’s support for me to start over. I didn’t mean for it to happen, but everyone’s eyes were leaking and Debbi blew her nose into a napkin. But it was Bill who got up from his seat and came around to envelop me in a great big hug.

“I’m sorry to upset you all. But I figured you would end up knowing anyway. Better to just get it out there,” I said.

“Honey, so much heartache for you. I think we can all agree,” Debbi said, looking around at everyone, “you have a home here. You just tell us any little thing that you need, and we’re going to make it happen. In fact, I hear that you need a car. I’m off tomorrow, and we’re going to make that happen.”

All the ladies came around Bill and me and put their arms around us in one giant hug.

“And I’m taking you shopping this weekend for all the household items that you need,” said Edie. “Daisy loves shopping. And we can visit the Abby Gardens and get some ice cream.”

My eyes completely teared up and even leaked a little. They had completely enveloped me in their care. There were good people out there. And it seemed I had found the best of the best. I was beginning to think there might be hope for me.

Chapter 12

I didn't want to be late, but I felt like I was going to be. I had been feeling this crazy sense of foreboding all morning. It was my first day of work, and something felt off. I made sure that I had turned off the stove and double-checked that I had locked my apartment door and that the Barn door was closed tightly. I looked down to double-check that I had everything. Lunch? Yes. New Ford Focus keys? Yes. I walked over to my bright blue car and got in. I remembered to get in on the right side of the car. I put my lunch and purse on the passenger side and started the car. It was just starting to get light out. Work started early at a bakery. It was only 4:30 in the morning.

I had been lucky to find a used car on base. An outgoing military member had put it on the used car lot. It was just within my price range, and as a bonus, it was an automatic. It seemed that there were a lot of manual transmissions in England.

I put the car into gear and headed down the driveway. I had rehearsed the route to town and scouted where to park near the bakery twice the last couple of days. I was prepared. I came up to the roundabout and turned right. An oncoming car nicked my passenger side. I was going the wrong way.

~

I walked in through the bakery's back door seven minutes past the hour. I was late.

"Diaz! This is not an auspicious beginning for you to be late on your first day!" roared Gabriel Barlowe. He was putting something into the oven, and his other bakery assistant was pouring flour into a bowl. Neither one was looking at me.

“Yes, Chef. I apologize. It won’t happen again, sir,” I said. There was no point in an explanation. It didn’t matter.

“This is Jerry Gill, my other assistant. You do what he tells you to do today. I’ve got you both working on muffins and pasties today. Put your things in the office,” he motioned to a side room. “There’s a fridge if you need it, and clean aprons are hanging on the wall. Then get back out here ASAP.” He was all business, a contrast to his personal kindness in the interview. But this was what I remembered from class. He made me think of Gordon Ramsay but with brown hair and brown eyes. I guessed that he was in his fifties, although I couldn’t be sure.

“Yes, Chef.” I hustled into the office, put my things away, donned an apron, and hustled back out.

Jerry looked at me kindly. He was of average height, on the thin side, with thick auburn hair. He wore glasses that made me think of Johnny Depp with red hair. He even had the stubble on his face. “We’re starting with chocolate and blueberry muffins. The recipes for the day are posted on the wall,” he pointed to several corkboards over the work counters. “We assemble ingredients and then start. I’ve grabbed the ingredients already. Why don’t you start measuring, and I’ll mix.” There were several professional mixers in the center island.

“Thank you,” I said, grateful for his soft tones. He winked at me. *I think I’m going to like it here.*

The rest of the morning went without a hitch. The three of us seemed to have a second sense of where the others were in the space and moved around each other well. It had taken a while to perfect this at my last bakery, so I was happy that we seemed to flow together easily. We gathered ingredients, mixed, cleaned, and worked our way through each recipe posted for the day. Occasionally, Gabriel would call one of us over to help him with something.

We worked for four hours baking the day's supply until right before nine when a girl about my age came in. She had blonde hair cut into a pixie and soft hazel eyes.

"Good morning," she said. "I'm Jenny, Jerry's sister. Weird, I know. But this works with my evening class schedule. I'm guessing you're Hope. Welcome to the bakery! I work the cash register until we close at two."

"Hi, thanks," I said.

"When we open for business, I'll have you gathering orders, Hope," Gabriel said. "You and Gill can switch off every other day, either helping Jenny or helping me."

"Yes, Chef," Jerry and I said at the same time. He winked at me again. I grinned back at him.

"Now, take a break before we open," Gabriel said before he popped out the back door.

~

Jenny took the orders and rang them up. She posted them on a clipboard behind the display case, and I filled bakery boxes or bags with people's orders and handed them to the customers. There were only two inside tables, and we didn't offer drinks. So, while we hit some peaks, there wasn't the scurrying that I was used to back in Seattle.

Before I knew it, Jenny was closing up the cash register. I hadn't realized how busy we had been until I saw that we had almost sold out of everything. Gabriel and Jerry had the back looking immaculately clean.

"Diaz, I want to talk to you." Jenny and Jerry grabbed their things from the office, smiled at me, and headed out the back door.

"Yes, Chef."

“You did very well today. I remember that about you. You work hard and don’t complain. That’s why I hired you. And you didn’t whine or make excuses for being late. Of course, I would have preferred that you not be late,” Gabriel stated.

“Yes, Chef.”

“You do realize that not every baker is a chef?” he asked.

“Yes, Chef. But I know that you went to culinary school, and you teach all over Europe. Would you prefer that I call you something else?” I asked.

“No. Just making sure you understood.”

“Thank you.” I stood there awkwardly, wondering if I was expected to say something else.

“That’s all then. I’ll see you in the morning. On time,” he smirked.

Chapter 13

After work, I decided to walk around the town a little bit and get to know my surroundings better. Milburn embodied the picture of a small English village. The cobblestone streets were narrow, with small shops on either side. Narrow sidewalks were filled with carts outside, peddling wares like flowers, bread, and clothing sales. I walked into the sausage shop, intending to get something for my dinner.

“Hello, love, I’ll be right with you,” came a gruff voice from behind the counter. A big, burly man turned around with a wide smile. “Now, what can I can get for ye?”

I grinned in return, tickled by the prominent local Midlands accent. (I had been hearing it a lot and asked Madeleine because she didn't speak with such a thick accent.) "What would you recommend? I just moved here and would like a sausage for my supper."

"Oh, did ye now? I would recommend the Cumberland. Goes right nicely with mashed potatoes. So, what brought you here to our little hamlet?"

"That would be perfect. I'll have two, please," I replied. "I just started working at the bakery with Gabriel Barlowe."

"Right, I heard that he hired another assistant. An American. I guess that would be you," he said as he packed two sausages in butcher paper for me. "I'm Adair, but everyone calls me Tiny. For obvious reasons," he winked. "This is on the house. Welcome to Milburn, young lady."

"I'm Hope. And thank you so much! That's very kind of you."

"Have a great evening, and come back soon!"

I headed up the street, browsing in the little curio shops while holding my dinner. The market day crowd was still shopping also. As I was looking at some candlesticks on the sidewalk, someone bumped me.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, miss," said a pair of the biggest blue eyes that I had ever seen. I zoomed out enough to take in the fact that the face they were in was rather handsome.

"That's alright," I said. He turned and kept walking. I shook myself. I hadn't had a reaction like that in, oh, years. Since I met Christopher. It was for the best that he kept walking.

I set down the candlesticks and continued along the street. There was a large window display with all sorts of books. The window and door trim were a solemn green, very library-ish. I decided to go in. A little bell jingled. I couldn't see that anyone was inside, but I thought that I

might as well look around. There was a mix of old, used books and new releases arranged according to type: cooking, fiction, biographies, etc. I was in the local interest when an older man with grey hair and glasses walked out of a door that I hadn't seen.

“Oh, you frightened me,” I said.

“Well, I'm sorry about that! Hello, welcome to my shop. I'm George. What brings you in today?” he asked. He must be almost eighty and walked with a slight stoop. But he seemed spry and mentally alert.

“I'm Hope. I was wandering around, getting to know the town. I love books, so I thought I'd find something interesting about the area.”

“I was just making some tea, Hope. Care to join me while you browse?”

“That sounds wonderful. I would love a cup. Thank you!”

George disappeared back inside the hidden door while I pulled a couple of titles from the shelves.

He came back out in a few minutes carrying two steaming old china teacups. “Let's sit back here,” he said, leading the way to a back room filled with children's books and two cozy armchairs. He set the cups down on a table between the two and sat down. “Now,” he said after I sat down, “tell me about yourself.” No preamble. No, “How are you?” But his eyes were kind, and after my day, it felt good to talk a bit.

I gave him the short version of why I had come. “And then, instead of a fresh start, I was late to work. I made my new boss mad on my first day.” I reached for the cup and took a long slow drink. The tea was perfect—just the right amount of cream and sugar. I told him about the car accident.

He sat for a moment with his tea before speaking. I didn't rush him. "Hope, I'm sorry that you've learned about grief so young in life. But grief comes to us all at some point in some way." He paused again.

"Almost twenty-five years ago, I lost my son and his wife in a car accident. They were so young and full of life. He had just gotten a promotion, and they were looking for houses outside of London. My wife and I were devastated. You should never have to bury your children. But the worst part was that my grandson, Brian, lost two wonderful, doting parents. My wife, Layla, she did her best, but how do you overcome the trauma that a five-year-old experiences after a sudden tragedy like that? And then, ten years later, Layla got cancer. It took her quickly. Neither Brian nor I knew what to do. We just got along. Eventually, we grew extremely close. Always checking up on me. He's a wonderful young man, overcome quite a bit. You should meet him. What I'm saying is that you don't have let this hold you back. Look how far you've come already—halfway around the world! Don't let today mar your new beginning. Gabriel will get over it. Just keep proving yourself."

I sat in the encouragement and let it warm my heart. George sipped his tea. The silence was a quiet, friendly silence.

"George, I think you're right. I'm just going to move forward and not dwell on today. It wasn't all bad. I got free sausages for my dinner. And I met you. That's been the best part," I said.

George chuckled. "Well, I haven't let you see my wicked side." He slowly stood and picked up our cups.

The door to the shop opened. "Halloo! George, you here, mate?"

“Coming, Ed.” George turned to me. “Thank you for keeping an old man company for tea. You stop by any time. I’m afraid I have to cut this short. Ed needs some help with his books. Have to pay employees, you know?”

I stood. “Thank you for your kindness, George. I’ve got to make my supper anyway. A baker’s day starts early.” I gave him a quick hug. He hugged me back awkwardly.

“You come back. I’ll introduce you to my grandson,” he winked at me.

“Now, George, there will be none of that. Let me adjust to being here first.”

I left the shop smiling, leaving George to help Ed. Perhaps the day hadn’t been a total disaster.

Chapter 14

The next few days of work went without a hitch. Gabriel, Jerry, and I got into a rhythm of work. While Jerry and I worked mostly on the quick breads like muffins and cookies, Gabriel worked on the more complex breads and pastries, like sourdough and croissants, that involved many steps like rising and proofing and resting. After Jenny would come in, Gabriel would talk us through the secrets and tricks of these breads, making sure we had enough dough prepped for the next day’s baking.

On a Tuesday afternoon, the shop closed, and I headed to my car. I had parked in the public car park behind the local grocery. Right in front of me, a lady carrying groceries had one of her bags break. I rushed over to help her. “Agh. These bags aren’t any good. And I think it was overstuffed. I always forget my own bags. Thank you!” She had honey-blond hair and freckles across her nose. She looked about my age. She grabbed a can of olives that had rolled away. I gathered a few things and put them in my own bag that I used to carry things to work.

“I think this bag will work. My name is Hope.”

“Hi! I’m Dani. Just doing my midweek shopping. You’re a lifesaver.”

I don’t know if it was the good feelings of the work week, the warm sunshine on my face, being surrounded by summertime flowers, or her kind eyes, but I felt a connection run between us as I said, “Nah. Just helping out.”

“Well, I think you’re lovely. Look, my flat is just right over there. Come have tea, and I’ll give you your bag back. Do come. I baked a nice pudding last night. We can chat while it heats up.”

I didn’t think that she was a crazy person, and her flat seemed to overlook the village, so someone would hear me if I screamed. “Alright. Thank you! I’ve just got off work and am rather hungry. I rushed through my lunch because we were busy today. I work at the bakery down the next street.”

“Ooh,” she said. “Doesn’t your day start early? Especially if you’re just now getting off. I had the day off because my boss wanted it off. I never complain when she does this. I just say, ‘Yes, ma’am,’ and go about my business. I can’t have her thinking it’s not normal to take a day off in the middle of the week,” she laughed. I loved the sound of her laugh. It had a tenor to it that made me think of windchimes: wild and carefree.

“What do you do? If you don’t mind my asking. This sounds like an ideal job!”

Dani led me over to the row of flats and up the stairs. The flats were part of a grey brick building that was two stories tall, with flats on both levels. Everyone had flower baskets on the railings in front of their flats. I saw purple lobelia, pink petunias, and yellow daisies. Every door was painted a different color, with brass numbers in the middle. She walked up to the red door.

“This is me! Oh, I work for the owner of an art gallery in Cambridge. Sometimes I work the floor selling, but mostly I’m her personal assistant. I schedule her showings and what artists come in and whatnot. I love it.” She opened the door and led me in. I was surprised at the inside. While the building was charming and clearly well-kept on the outside, I wasn’t prepared for the amount of light inside. The whole back wall was essentially like a greenhouse.

“Oh my!” I exclaimed.

“Lovely, isn’t it? The sunroom is why I drive forty minutes to work. That, and I love Milburn. Go look out the windows. There’s a garden. I’ll put these groceries away and start our tea.” She went into the kitchen, which was a bit on the small side. But I could see why she didn’t seem to mind. I walked over to the window and looked out on a large communal garden with trees and flowers planted informally. It was a riot of color right now. Benches and lounge chairs had been placed in groupings which invited people to linger. I could see one young couple out with their baby in what looked like an old-fashioned pram. They were talking, and the mother jiggled the pram. The baby was clearly asleep. Butterflies flew around, and even through the glass, I could hear birds calling.

I didn’t notice when Dani came and stood beside me. “Should we take our tea out to that table?” She pointed to a picnic bench set by a small pond in the corner of the garden.

“That would be amazing.”

“Or we can sit on my balcony. It’s small, but then we can look at the whole garden. You can choose.” She led the way over to a door off the kitchen. It led out to a small balcony with two wrought-iron chairs and a table. There were red cushions on the chairs and flowers on the table.

“This is stunning. I would never leave. How do you even go to work every day?” I asked.

“Well, something has to pay for it,” Dani giggled. “But I see your point.”

“Let’s just sit here,” I said. “The view is stunning.” I couldn’t help from looking at the garden. “Is that honeysuckle?”

“Yes. We have a gardener come every summer to take care of this space. I grew up in Cornwall, where it’s warmer, and we always had honeysuckle. I asked him if we could make honeysuckle work here. He said because the garden is walled, it would be fine over the winter. So he planted some right below my window for me up against the building. Now both Greta, she lives below, and I enjoy it. Why don’t you sit? The tea and pudding should be warm any sec.” She went back inside.

I couldn’t help but reflect on how much had happened in such a short time. I had wonderful neighbors, the job seemed to be moving along well after my initial hiccup, and here I was in a beautiful flat with a new friend. Still, it was times like this my heart ached. Chris would have loved this garden. His family were all gardeners in southern California. They lived and breathed gardening. I took my phone out of my pocket to take a photo. I sent it to Chris’s mom. *Te amo. Soy así.* (I love you. I am well.) She probably wouldn’t respond. It was mid-morning there, and she would be working. I put the phone back in my pocket.

Dani came out with a tray filled with tea and dinner plates, and even a plate of cookies. “Here you go, love. Just grab that cup, would you? Perfect.” She sat down. “Aah. This is quite nice.”

We sat and ate and chatted until the air began to feel damp and the garden became quiet. She told me about growing up in Cornwall with three older brothers, and I told her about growing up an only child with a single mom. We talked about books and cooking and our

favorite shows. I didn't realize that it was getting so late until I saw a light come on from the apartment below.

“Oh! It's getting late. I'm so sorry. I've got to run. I need to be to work early.”

I helped clean up, and we exchanged numbers, promising to do something together soon. I hadn't talked “girl chat” like that with someone since before I married Christopher. It felt good.

Chapter 15

Something wasn't right. The croissants were deflated. Completely. It looked as if the dough had all imploded. Where the dough should have doubled, this dough looked as if someone had taken a steamroller and flattened it. All of it. All of the day's baking. Gabriel was so upset that he didn't even say anything. Jerry looked down, not even able to offer me a wink this time. I hung my head. I didn't know what I had done, but I had done something wrong.

“Jerry, why don't you pull the ingredients for the muffins this morning?” Gabriel asked in a very tight, clipped voice. “Hope, I want you to read the croissant recipe, retrace your steps, and tell me exactly what went wrong. I have to make something else quickly. We will have no croissants today. Do it in my office.” With that, he turned his back on me and began throwing the dough into the trash. Tears poured down my cheeks, but I went into the office without saying a word.

I read and re-read the recipe, trying to place myself back into the moment as I prepared the ingredients. It was at the end of the day and we were prepping tomorrow's, or today's, dough. I had been working with Gabriel all week prepping the croissant dough for the next day.

Yesterday had seemed a day like any other. Jerry was making muffins, and Jenny was waiting on customers.

Ingredients were always measured out and placed on the workspace before actual mixing began to ensure that everything was available. And in the case of croissants, time was of the essence because you wanted the butter to remain cool. While it had been warm this week, it wasn't warm enough inside the bakery to create the devastation that I had just witnessed. I remembered that Gabriel was standing near the mixers, and I had to reach up to get a new sack of flour down from the shelving. Bowls were laid out in anticipation of measuring ingredients into each bowl, which would then be added by Gabriel into the commercial mixer.

I looked at the recipe closely, holding it up to my face, and spoke the ingredients out loud. I paused when I came to the yeast. The recipe said eighty grams of dry instant yeast. But there was a slight fold in the recipe, and I remembered adding one hundred and eighty grams because I had to pour twice into the small measuring cup. So, that would do it. If you over-yeast your dough, the yeast will release too much gas and cause your dough to go flat. I had no excuse—fold or no. It was the first time that Gabriel trusted me to gather the ingredients, and I messed up. I sighed.

The office, like the rest of the bakery, was immaculately organized and clean. There was a space for everything. Even places for our personal things and lunches in the refrigerator were labeled. I knew that baking was not like cooking. Things like the right amount of yeast matter. And, more importantly, it mattered to Gabriel. Maybe I wasn't cut out for this. My house wasn't super-organized or clean. I sighed again and then gathered myself together and went into the baking area.

Gabriel was mixing some kind of quick bread that would be ready for the morning rush. He didn't even look up. "Did you figure it out?"

"Yes, Chef. I added too much yeast," I replied.

"Don't do it again. And by the way, too much salt will dehydrate the dough, and it will flatten out also. I wanted you to figure it out. Now, help Jerry with the cookies."

"Yes, Chef."

The rest of the day didn't go much better. Being upset threw me off balance, and I seemed to run into Jerry all the time. I was out of sync with everyone, and it showed. I had never been happier to leave the bakery.

~

I wanted to feel better, so I wandered over to the bookshop after work. George was such a sweetheart; I wanted to hear his voice. He lived up to my expectations.

"Well, there you are, lovely girl! It's so nice to see you. What have you been up to? Come help me with this order. Would you mind putting price stickers on while I shelve these?" he asked.

"I would be happy to help. I don't think that I can mess that up," I whined.

"Woe-hoe. What have we got here? Someone have a bad day?"

I sighed. "I'm sorry. Yes, I had a very bad day. I messed up the whole day's batch of croissants." I knew that I was feeling sorry for myself, but I couldn't help it. I had really been mindful of the fact that I was here living this amazing adventure because Chris wasn't here anymore. And it ate at me. I waffled between grief, guilt, and excitement. Mostly, the guilt won out. Especially when I realized that it had been six months since I had kissed him goodbye, and I hadn't realized it until the day after.

“I’m sure that Gabriel was his usual pleasant self. But never mind. You’re helping me now, and then we’ll have a spot of tea. That always sets everything right.” George began humming a tune that seemed familiar to me, but I couldn’t place it. It did, however, take my mind off myself. Soon, we were bantering back and forth about who was a better writer, Tolkien or C.S. Lewis. I was team Lewis, and George was for Tolkien. We finished our tasks and went back to the little sitting area where we had sat before. George brought out the tea. I sighed.

“There must be more to it than a bad day at work,” he said.

My eyes grew wide. “How do you do that?”

“Do what, my dear?” he feigned innocence.

“Know what’s going on in my head,” I blurted. I set the tea down and looked him straight in the eyes.

He only smiled and took a sip of his tea. “Well, dear, you’ve sighed at least a dozen times since you’ve arrived. Sighing seems to me more of a sad or discontented response. So, what’s really going on?”

I told him about not remembering Chris’s last day with me and the guilt that I felt.

“I understand what you’re feeling,” he said. “But you might want to consider that these are normal reactions to grief and moving on. Moving on means that you’re accepting your loss, and you’re fighting it because it seems as if moving on means letting go.”

I paused. That was exactly it. I didn’t want to let go of Chris.

“How do you do that?” I asked again.

“My dear, you don’t get to be my age without living life. Grief comes to us all at some point in some way. Now, maybe you need to meet some more people. Let me introduce you to my grandson.” His eyes twinkled.

I laughed. “You’re a meddler. I’m not ready to meet anyone, thank you. You’re the only man I need right now.” I leaned over and kissed his forehead.

Chapter 16

Things hadn’t been much more pleasant at work over the course of the next week, and Gabriel didn’t say no when I asked for time off. So, Dani and I were heading to Bath for a long weekend. The air was warm, and everyone in the Barn had left for work already. My suitcase was in the downstairs hall while I watched from my window for Dani to come pick me up. I had the window open to hear the birds. They were very chatty as they dashed about, looking for breakfast. The roses and gardenias from the hedge mixed in a decidedly summery scent that lifted my spirits after a long week of working in silence.

I was looking forward to this trip. Dani and I had texted and met for a shopping trip on market day, but this would be the first extended amount of time together. Our friendship was one of those instant-rapport kind of things, and I wasn’t going to take it for granted. She was wise beyond her years but maintained a wild, carefree attitude that contrasted with my more quiet, thoughtful side. I love being around her.

The birds scattered from searching the pebble drive for food as she drove up in a little Cooper Mini the color of the forest. She hopped out.

“I’ll be right down,” I shouted. Dani looked up and waved, a huge grin on her face.

“Hurry it up; the Sally Lunn buns are waiting!”

I ran down the stairs after making sure all the windows were closed and everything was locked up. She ran up and gave me a hug. “Are you ready?” I put my weekend bag in the back seat, and we took off.

We shared about our weeks and alternated with some car karaoke concerts to the radio. We discovered that we both had a love of old Rolling Stones and concert piano. We drove into Bath right before lunchtime. Dani followed the signs to a downtown car park, and we started walking around looking for a place to eat. In front of us was a group of people listening to a lady in a blue apron talking about the history of Bath. We stopped to listen. “You’re welcome to join us. This is a free walking tour through the Tourist Information Centre.”

“Thank you!” we said in unison. The group of about five all said, “Hi.”

“Now, here we are in front of the Assembly Rooms. You may recognize them from *Pride and Prejudice* with Colin Firth...”

It felt wonderful to soak in all the history of Bath as we walked around the downtown area. We saw the Roman bathhouse and Bath Abbey, the Royal Crescent and Pulteney Bridge. I was able to forget for a while about the stress of my job. And missing Christopher. He was always such an encourager when things weren’t going well. I missed his warmth. While England was wonderful, perhaps I should go home.

The tour ended near the bridge. “Are you starving?” asked Dani. “I am! Let’s go get those buns. She led me through the streets back toward the Abbey and down a cobbled side street. Because it was mid-week and off-peak hours, we were seated immediately.

“I had no idea that the first king was crowned here at the Bath Abbey,” I said. “I thought it would be somewhere closer to London or in the east.”

“Yes, this was before William the Conqueror in 1066. People don’t usually hear about English history before that.” We continued talking about the tour until our food came. We both had ordered savory buns, and each got half of a bun with toppings. Dani’s had roast vegetables on top, while mine had brie and cranberry sauce. We shared a pot of tea. It was silent as we ate our food. I looked around at the restaurant. Wood tables on older wood floors made me wonder what it would have been like hundreds of years ago. It didn’t look like much had changed. The ceilings were still low. Perhaps some of the wallpaper was different or non-existent, but the overall feeling must have been similar. I had never been somewhere as old before. It made me feel insignificant. Like no matter what happened to me, time would keep going, and someone else would be sitting at this table years from now. I wasn’t sure if that comforted me or not, but I soaked in the atmosphere, smelling my food to imprint a memory.

~

After we checked into a B&B just outside the city center for the night, Dani said, “You seemed a little distracted at lunch. Is everything alright?”

“You know, I don’t really want to dwell on it while we’re here. I mean, look around; everything is so cool! Let’s just say that I’m starting to question whether or not I belong so far away from my old life.”

Dani sat quietly for a moment. I looked across at her, sitting on the four-poster twin bed that matched the one I was on. She was beautiful but acted as if she didn’t know it. I had to admit that it felt wonderful to have a girlfriend again.

“Okay, we won’t talk about any of that on this trip. We’re going to have fun. And maybe you’ll think England is so lovely that you won’t want to leave at the end of this.” She smiled and pulled a map out of her purse. “Now, what are we going to do tomorrow?”

~

The weekend was a success. I tried to etch every detail into my mind: flowers in bloom everywhere, ancient buildings that went back thousands of years, the stories of the Roman baths, and all the jewelry they had found there. (What was it like wearing jewelry in Roman times?) I thought that I gained at least five pounds from all the scones and jam that we ate for breakfast, snacks, and tea times. But mostly, we wandered the streets, stopping to look at whatever we fancied. There were linen shops, toy shops, and markets. We looked at all the ads in the estate agent (realtor) windows, pretending that we were moving and choosing the most ostentatious homes that we could find.

And we talked and laughed like I hadn't done in months. It had been a balm for my heart. Did I want to leave this new friend? I truly didn't know.

Chapter 17

When I went back to work on Monday, Gabriel seemed to have cooled off, and Jerry was back to smiling and winking. We seemed to get our flow back in the bakery, moving around one another like a carefully orchestrated ballet. And when Jenny came in for the day, she would turn the radio up until we opened. I even caught Gabriel humming and moving from side to side as he sugared the croissants.

~

The Barn had a picnic the next Friday because the weather was outrageously warm, and we didn't want to stay inside. Daisy ran from person to person, being petted and loved and soaking it all in. She even decided to let me push her in the swing and then wouldn't leave my

side the rest of the evening. Bill and Edie were talking about perhaps having another. Debbi said that she had been there almost two years and, unless she asked for an extension on her duty assignment, might be due for orders within the next year. Madeleine was her usual talkative self, talking about her family and GiGi, who ran around Daisy's feet and looked for table scraps from everyone. Even for a Yorkie, GiGi was on the small side, which just made her cuter. She never barked for what she wanted but would come up to you and put her paw on your foot.

Things settled into a routine both at work and at home. Summer at the Barn was lovely. The grass was green, and the windows were always open to catch the breeze.

~

I woke to a banging on my door. It was dark. I sat up to be sure that I wasn't dreaming. No. There it was again. I grabbed my robe from the foot of the bed and floundered my way out of the covers and into the robe. Just before I got to the door, the banging started again.

I opened the door to see Madeleine, red hair all askew, holding GiGi and a large shopping bag. "I'm so sorry. But there's an emergency. I have to go and can't take her with me. You've got to take care of her." She walked past me and put down the bag and GiGi. "I don't think that she's feeling well. I would take her with me, but the drive is too long for her not feeling well. Normally, I would say that you can leave her home. But please don't. She's fine wherever you go. Take her bed, and she'll stay on it until you tell her it's okay to get up. I'm sorry. Watch her and make sure she eats. She's been a little lethargic. I'll explain later. Thank you so much." She gave me a hug, and then she was gone.

I turned on a light. It was two in the morning. I would have to be up in two hours. I turned to the traumatized dog. She just sat there, looking at me with blinking eyes. "Well, let's see what we have in the bag." I pulled out a small dog bed, some kibble, a leash, and two bowls.

“Let’s get you set up with some water and then see if we can’t get some more sleep, shall we?” Because Madeleine’s apartment was the same layout as mine, I put the water where she put it in her place, hoping that GiGi would go there automatically, which she did. I grabbed her bed and took it into my room. She followed and made herself at home. I turned out the lights and hopped back into bed, robe and all, praying for more sleep.

~

I made it out of the apartment barely on time. I loaded all of the dog paraphernalia back into the shopping bag and put GiGi into my car. I wasn’t sure how this was going to go at work. I knew that I was skating on thin ice when it came to Gabriel.

I parked and grabbed GiGi and all her stuff, plus my lunch. I walked into the bakery and went straight to the office. Gabriel wasn’t there yet. Jerry was pulling ingredients. I put GiGi’s bed in a corner with her water dish right next to her. I placed her in her bed and said, “Now, don’t get up. I know that you’re not feeling well, but my job depends on you being a good girl. I’ll come to check on you in a bit.”

I went into the bakery and donned my apron. Jerry looked at me, shook his head, and kept working. I started grabbing bowls and utensils. Then Gabriel walked in. He went into the office and came back out immediately. “Would someone like to tell me what is going on?” he roared.

I stepped toward him. “I’m sorry. My neighbor came to me at two this morning with an emergency. She couldn’t take GiGi and said that she wasn’t feeling well, so I had to take her with me. She said that she’ll stay in her bed. I had no choice.” I looked at him defiantly. “My neighbor matters to me.”

“Are you trying to get me shut down? We’re not allowed to have dogs in here! If it wasn’t market day, I’d send you home. If that dog moves one inch off of its bed, it’s going to

find the bed out on the sidewalk. Is that clear?" He didn't wait for an answer and put on his chef's coat. He hadn't thrown me out, so I considered this a win.

I went to check on her every time that Jerry and I were at a good point in our baking. GiGi seemed to have settled in and truly didn't leave her bed during the morning. When it was time for my break, I scooped her up and took her to the park to have a short walk. GiGi did seem lethargic, as Madeleine had said, but she was drinking her water and walking around the park sniffing at things that interested her. It was cloudy and cold, so I wasn't tempted to linger. We headed back to the bakery quickly.

This market day was not as busy as the previous one had been, probably because of the weather. George waved at me from inside the bookshop as I walked by. I smiled, the first of the day. GiGi didn't complain when I put her back on her bed. She turned around twice and then lay down, closing her eyes immediately. I put my apron back on and went to add filling to the cheese croissants. Gabriel gave me a nod but didn't say anything. Jerry raised his eyebrows to ask how things were going. I gave him half a smile to indicate that GiGi was behaving herself.

Thankfully, the rest of the day passed without incident, but I could definitely feel the cold shoulder being presented to me by Gabriel. We all still danced our dance around the bakery, but the warm camaraderie was missing. I didn't linger after work to talk to Jenny like usual. I packed up GiGi and our things and was out the door in a flash. Unusual for me, I was the first one out.

~

I let Madeleine in. "Hope, I know that I put you out, and I'm so sorry. But my school chum went into hospital. And GiGi doesn't do well on very long car rides. I had to go all the way to Kent. She wasn't feeling well to begin with. I'm sorry. Please let me make it up to you. I hope

that she was okay for you,” she gushed. I could tell that Madeleine really was upset about leaving GiGi.

“It’s fine,” I assured her. “She was a peach at work. And she’s perked up this evening. She ate all her food and was bouncy after dinner.” I looked at the clock. It was past ten. I should have been in bed hours ago. “That’s a long way to drive in one day, there and back. How is your friend?”

“She’s going to be okay. She had a stroke, so there’s still a lot of recovery ahead. I was worried that I wouldn’t be able to say goodbye. But the doctor assured us that it was a mild one. She’ll go to a rehabilitation hospital for a spell but should be right as rain. She was talking a little slurred, but she knew what was going on. Thank you for taking GiGi. I knew that I didn’t have to worry about her with you. Thank you!”

“I was happy to help, Madeleine. And I’m so glad that your friend is going to be okay and that it wasn’t a goodbye. That’s just devastating to think about.” I hugged her. She had done so much to welcome me that I wouldn’t dream of telling her about Gabriel being so awful. She was a true friend. I valued that more than I could express.

Chapter 18

The next few weeks had been decidedly cool at work. Jenny still turned up the music before customers came in, and Gabriel, Jerry, and I still had a good rhythm, but not much was said to me from Gabriel. Not that he talked much to begin with, but there was an obvious difference in his tone with Jerry. I was getting the cold shoulder. I left every day feeling slightly defeated, despite how my baking was improving and how much I was learning. As the

temperatures outdoors heated up (we were having a heatwave), I felt slightly colder on the inside.

One day the bakery was slow, so after work, I had pent-up energy. I decided to visit George after stopping in and chatting with Tiny and buying some sausages. I came out of the shop, peeking into my bag to make sure that I had ordered the right thing, and then, bump! I ran into someone. I looked up. “I’m so sorry!” I exclaimed. “I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

Then his face came into focus. It was the man who had run into me months back. He chuckled. Blue eyes pierced mine. “We have to stop meeting like this.”

I didn’t answer. I was unnerved by seeing him. He caught my attention; I just wasn’t sure that I wanted it caught.

He continued smiling. “Well, you have a good day.” He walked away.

~

When I entered the bookshop, George was sitting in a chair in the back. “Welcome to the Milburn Bookshop!” he called.

“George, it’s me, Hope.” I walked to the back. He didn’t look quite right. His color seemed off. “George, are you alright?”

“Oh, Hope. Hi. I’m glad you’re here. It’s always a pleasure to see you.” He didn’t get up.

“Hello, I’m ready to check out!” someone announced from the front of the store.

“Why don’t I get that?” I patted George on the knee and went to check the person out. I had never done it before, but how hard could it be? It turned out that the cash register was very basic, and George used handwritten receipts. I wrote down the lady’s name, book title, and amount on the receipt and gave her change. Thankfully, tax is already included in purchase prices in England, so I didn’t need to do any calculating. I walked her to the front of the store,

noticing some piles of books meant to be shelved. After she walked out, I locked the door and turned over the “open” sign so that it said “closed.”

I went back to George. He was still sitting and smiling. “Thank you, dear,” he said. “I’m feeling a bit tired. I think that I’ll close up for the rest of the day. Would you like a cup of tea first?”

“I already closed the front, George. I wrote her receipt like the others that I saw. I don’t need any tea. Why don’t you rest? Maybe the heat is getting to you. It’s been scorching lately. Do you have air conditioning in your home?” I had found that most British homes did not.

“No, dear. But I’ve got a lovely fan over my bed that Brian installed a few years back. I think I’ll go have a lie-down. Lovely to see you.” He led the way through the back door and then locked up the shop. “Now, you come see me again.” He ambled toward the car park, turning once to give me a wave. I waved back, then headed toward my own car in the opposite direction.

~

When I got home the next afternoon, I noticed a new car parked near the Barn. It was odd for anyone to have someone over in the middle of the week, especially in the early afternoon. I was always home from work before everyone because I went in so early. But I was preoccupied with my thoughts about turning sourdough bread dough perfectly, so I didn’t dwell on it.

I was surprised to see my mom sitting on the doormat, reading a magazine. “Mom!”

She was dressed casually for her, with light tan slacks and a white blouse. *How does she look so great after traveling all night?* She got up. I didn’t wait for her to say anything. I ran to her and threw my arms around her. At first, she felt a little stiff, but then she relaxed and put her arms around me in a tight squeeze. We stayed like that for a few seconds. It felt wonderful.

“I can’t believe you’re here! Why didn’t you tell me that you were coming? I would have taken some time off.”

“I wanted to surprise you. And besides, I can wander around while you work. I just felt like I needed to be here. Your texts have been really bland lately. So, I wanted to see you for myself.”

“Mom, you didn’t have to do that!” I ignored her subtle questioning. I opened the Barn door and then led the way upstairs to my flat. “Come on in. I hope you’re hungry. I work so early that I eat dinner, they call it tea here, early.”

“I could do with some food. And I’m tired. I didn’t sleep well on the plane. I hate red-eye flights. So, I’m sure that I’ll be ready to sleep when you are,” she said.

I showed her around, which didn’t take long. But then I took her back downstairs and out to the patio in the back. “Hope, you’ve found a beautiful place here. I was worried when you said that it was a barn. But this renovation is stunning. I’m so happy for you.” I knew that I wasn’t responsible for the renovation, but the praise felt warm around my shoulders. It wasn’t until then that I understood what getting the cold treatment at work over the last few weeks had done to me.

“Thanks, Mom. I love it here. And all of my neighbors are so nice,” I said. “Do you want to stay here while I go make some dinner?” It really was lovely outside. While the inside was stuffy, outside, there was a soft breeze that lightened the air. The songbirds called to each other, and there were dozens of butterflies around the flowers.

Mom looked at me, weighing her response. I could tell that she was torn, wanting to stay where she was. I couldn’t blame her. Her face had fine lines that I hadn’t noticed before, and there were dark circles under her eyes. I made the decision for her. “Rest here. It won’t take long

to make dinner. I know you've been traveling. I'll bring our dinner down, and we can eat out here." As much as I wanted to talk to her, I saw that she needed some rest, and not just sitting on the front step.

~

I drove into work the next morning feeling more settled after an evening of having Mom with me. It was the day after market day, so things would be slower than other days. I relished the relative quiet at work. Jerry had classical music on, and we were working on pasties. I prepared the fillings while Jerry made the dough and Gabriel made scones. Later we would work on the croissants. I was still mostly ignored by Gabriel except for necessary talk, but my heart was lighter. When it was time for my lunch break, I stepped outside into the fresh air. I was meeting my mom over at the café. I walked in to see Mom already seated at a table with a cup of coffee. She was talking to a tall, brown-haired man. I got to the table and, not wanting to interrupt, sat across from her and looked at the menu.

"Have a wonderful time here on your visit," he said. "It was lovely meeting you." I looked up and stared at Mr. Blue Eyes. Here he was again, but what was Mom doing talking to him? A corner of his mouth turned up into a slight grin. "Hello. I was just talking to your mother after she asked a question about what a jacket potato is. It's good to see you again. Have a great afternoon." And with that, he walked out of the café.

"Close your mouth, Hope. It's not attractive. Do you know that man? He seems very kind." Mom looked at me intently.

"I've only ever run into him on the streets here. Literally. The first time I met him, he ran into me, and the next time, I ran into him. Thankfully, no one was injured," I laughed. "I don't even know his name. Did you get his name?"

“No. We were standing in line to order. He was behind me, so I asked about the menu. We just started talking, and I mentioned that I was here visiting my daughter. No personal details were shared. He just seemed a kind stranger. But it seems that he must live here if you’ve run into him three times now.”

“I suppose that he does.

I looked around at the little café. It was one of my favorite places to come if I didn’t pack a lunch. It was small and relatively quiet, filled with mostly moms coming to do their shopping or meeting friends for a meal.

“I ordered you a chicken curry sandwich and English Breakfast tea, just as you requested. How has your morning been?”

A waitress came over with two plates and my tea. She took the number that was sitting on the table. Mom looked down, clearly thinking something, probably not about the food.

“It’s been okay.” Last night, I hadn’t told her about the situation at work. I had listened to her talk about real estate in Seattle and how her garden was doing. I shared about my neighbors and what I was learning at the bakery. *I guess now seems like a good time to tell her the rest.* So, over mouthfuls of chicken curry sandwich, I did. She sat quietly, sipping her coffee and taking small spoonfuls of soup. She didn’t say anything but let me talk. I had a lot to say because before I knew it, lunch was over, and I had to get back to work.

“I’ll stop at the grocer and bring home something yummy for dinner,” I said. “What are you going to do with the rest of the afternoon?”

“I saw a bookshop that I want to browse through, and then I think I’ll go rest on your patio,” Mom said.

“Oh! Say hi to George! He owns it, and he’s been a great friend to me. I met him right when I got here. He’s very wise.”

“But first, I think that I’ll come buy something from the bakery.” She looked determined. I could only hope that she wouldn’t say anything. I remembered back to sixth grade when a teacher had unfairly called me out for something all the girls in the class had done. She had gone full mama-bear on the teacher. She had that same don’t-mess-with-my-cub face on now. But I knew better than to try to dissuade her.

We walked the block over to the bakery in silence: me in fear and Mom in single-mindedness. I gave her a hug outside the entrance. “Thanks for lunch, Mom. I’ve got to go around back.” She patted my arm and went inside.

When I entered the bakery, I could see Mom up front perusing the shelves. Gabriel went up front. He didn’t usually do that. Jenny took care of the customers, or Jerry or I did if it was her day off.

I watched him charm her and make small talk. I only saw my mom through a child’s lens. But his attention to her made me realize that she was a very attractive woman. She had a cosmopolitan air in the way that she dressed. She looked more European than American. I heard Gabriel saying as much after she replied to his questions. She still sounded American.

“Is there a special occasion that you’re shopping for?” Gabriel asked.

“I’m here visiting my daughter. I would like something for dessert. I think that the cream puffs will be fine. I’ll take two, please,” she said.

Gabriel put two cream puffs in a bakery box while Jenny looked at him with a smirk. It was clear to all of us what was going on, and I wasn’t too happy about it.

“I’m sure that your daughter will enjoy these. She must be happy to have you here,” Gabriel said.

My mom smiled sweetly. “I think that she is. It seems that she’s had a bit of a rough patch.” She gave Gabriel her credit card.

Gabriel handed the card to Jenny to run the transaction. “Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. I hope things go better for her.”

“I’m sure that they will. Thank you.” My mom took the card back from Jenny and turned to leave.

“Ma’am. Don’t forget your box,” Gabriel said. I tried not to look up. I knew what was coming.

“Oh, thank you. Just send them home with Hope, won’t you?” The bell tinkled as the door closed behind her. Every single eye was on me. I just kept spooning muffin dough into the liners in the pan.

Jenny spoke first. “That was your mom, Hope?”

I looked at Jenny. She had a look of awe on her face. “Yes, that’s my mom. She came in last night unexpectedly,” I replied.

I looked at Jerry. He winked in solidarity.

“She’s beautiful,” Jenny said. “She looks so classy.”

I went back to the muffins. “She’s just my mom.”

Gabriel didn’t say anything. I wasn’t sure how this was going to go. He went into the office. I wondered if he felt embarrassed for trying to hit on my mom or if he was embarrassed because my mom admitted that things were difficult for me. Or if he was embarrassed at all.

Gabriel eventually came out of the office but didn't say anything. He continued to ignore me for the most part. That I could deal with. I was more than happy when work was over. This time it was me who didn't say anything as I left.

~

Mom and I were spending my day off in London. She wanted to shop, and I wanted high tea. So, we spent the morning on Oxford Street and Regent Street. Right before lunch, we went into Liberty London. I had never been to Liberty before. It was a department store in a Tudor revival building. It looked centuries old but was built in 1924. There were wood beams as you entered, with gilt crests over the window. Right after we walked in, there was an old wooden lift, what we call an elevator. We got in, and Mom hit the button for sleepwear. Everything about the store screamed "Old England." Wood floors and open views to floors below lent to an old-world elegance.

Liberty is famous for its floral fabrics, and Mom was determined to go home with a new pair of pajamas. While she was trying a few on, I found a beautiful watch with a face that matched the fabric band. It was simply tied onto your wrist. They had a few different fabrics to choose from, but I fell in love with one with a cream background and purple flowers. They looked like daisies, which are my favorite flower.

After we made our purchases, we wandered the rest of the store, looking at all things British. We avoided modern clothing but lingered in the flowers and the paper goods sections, relishing the beauty of things that we didn't see at home in the US.

"Honestly, Hope. I think that it's a good thing that I don't live here. I would spend all my time shopping!" Mom exclaimed. I giggled.

“No, you wouldn’t. You’re just on vacation. You never shop unless you have to. It’s almost time for our reservation.” Unfortunately, we had not been able to book The Ritz on such short notice, but someone had suggested Fortnum and Mason, so that’s where we were headed. And I loved the thought of shopping in the tea hall afterward.

The outside of the store was a beautiful sage green with peach accents. It felt like an old bakery. I tried not to gawk when we walked in. I had never seen so much tea in my life. And to the back, there were chocolates and macarons on display. But the very center of the store was open to the upper levels with a huge chandelier that hung from high above. My mom pointed to the signs for the lift and started walking. I put my hand on her arm as we weaved through the crowds so that I could ogle all of the beautiful food on display.

Upstairs was beautiful as well. Everything was decorated in robin’s egg blue and gold. We were seated and given a choice of different high teas. After we both ordered the standard high tea and made our tea selections, Mom turned to me. “Now, Hope. How are you really doing? There seems to be such a juxtaposition of your home and neighbors with your work situation. And I’m sorry if I made things worse. I wanted Gabriel to know that you are not without support.” She placed her napkin on her lap. She really did look elegant. Her light blue trousers and white blouse were set off perfectly with a navy silk scarf around her neck and her hair pulled back into a twist. I sighed. She was right. I felt the push and pull of the good and not-so-good of my circumstances.

“It’s like you said. Good and bad. And the sense of adventure that I feel living here. I mean, look at what we’ve seen today. But then I miss Christopher and everything that was home for us. I miss Green Park and taking walks on the water. But I know those things won’t be the

same. So, I guess I'm doing okay. I knew Gabriel had high standards, and I was willing to work towards those standards. But I didn't expect him to hold grudges. It just seems so wrong."

A waiter brought us each a three-level, gold serving stand with three blue and gold plates filled with tea sandwiches, scones, and desserts. I hated to even talk about work in such an opulent atmosphere. I wanted to revel in my tea and scones. But Mom brought me back to reality.

"Do you think that you should move back home?" She poured herself another cup of tea and added cream and sugar. The clinking of the gold spoon against the teacup made me feel optimistic somehow.

"I don't think that I'm at that point yet. Let's enjoy our tea."

"Hope, I don't want to seem pessimistic. I'm trying to be practical here. It would be better if you came home sooner rather than later if that's what is going to happen. I can start asking around about jobs for you."

And just like that, I didn't feel supported but railroaded, the way that I always used to feel around her. She was taking charge, and I better line up. I gritted my teeth, determined to enjoy the tea that I had been longing for. "Mom, I don't want to talk about it right now. I mean it. I'm going to give it some more time. We can talk about how wonderful the tea is or which museum you would like to spend the rest of the afternoon in." I looked directly at her and didn't waver. She relented.

"I think the National Portrait Gallery would be nice."

Chapter 19

I made my way from work down toward the bookshop. I could tell that it was time for the season to begin changing. It wasn't just the date on the calendar, but there was a coolness in the air, despite warm temperatures. And the light felt paler than it had only a few weeks ago. I pulled my lightweight sweater tighter around me and hurried past the sausage shop and the paper goods store, nearly tripping on the crack in the sidewalk.

I entered the bookshop and called out, "George! Do you have time for a cup?"

A lady was behind the checkout counter that I had never seen before. "Oh, hello, love. George isn't here. Can I help you?" She was an older lady with short, white curls and a matronly demeanor. I thought that I had done well adjusting to the local accent, but hers wasn't from here, and it was thick.

"No. I don't need a book. George is my friend, and I came to have a cup of tea with him. I'm Hope. When will he be back?"

She waffled for a moment before answering me. "Well, love, he's in the hospital. He had a heart attack last night. I'm Margie. I'm his neighbor. I've filled in for him a few times. I promised him that I would keep the shop running until he figures things out. He's going to be a while. Me and my husband, Tom, were with him last night when he got sick. We had to call the ambulance. We stopped in this morning to check on him."

I felt faint. My heart was pounding in my chest. My dear friend George. "Is he going to be alright? How serious is it? How long will he be in the hospital?" *My goodness. It never stops. One thing after another.*

“Calm down, love. He’s going to be fine. He’s going to have to make some changes. But it wasn’t a bad one, and he didn’t need surgery. They’re going to adjust some medicines before they send him home. You could probably go visit during visiting hours. But don’t stay long. He *is* tired, though. So, keep it chipper, will you?” She came around the counter and patted my arm. “I’m sure he would love the company. His grandson is out of the country at the moment, although I was able to get a call through to him. He’s on his way home.”

“Thank you!” I breathed. “I’ll go right now.” I turned to go but immediately turned back around. “Where is the hospital? I’m sort of new here.”

“It’s in Cambridge. He’s in the cardiac ward. If you stop at the information desk, they can tell you where to go.”

I turned again toward the door, yelling, “Thank you so much!”

~

Not for the first time, I was thankful that I got off of work before normal business hours ended. The sign on the hospital doors said that visiting hours were only until five. I went into the hospital and was immediately stopped by a desk with a young man behind it. He looked like he belonged in middle school but clearly was old enough to be working the desk. The sign underneath the counter proclaimed “information.” I guessed that I was in the right place. “Can I help you?” the young man asked.

“I’m looking for my friend. His name is George Turner. He’s in the cardiac ward,” I blurted out. My nerves were showing. I didn’t usually talk so fast.

He looked down at his computer and typed. “Right,” he said. “He is in room 1204. Follow the yellow line down this hall. At the end, go to the right and up the elevators to the twelfth floor. His room should be to the right.”

I followed his directions, taking in the antiseptic smell of the hospital. Did anyone like that smell? When I got to the twelfth floor, I got off and started looking at room numbers. Because it was visiting hours, all of the lights were on. The fluorescent lights made everything look harsh. I felt disjointed, like this wasn't supposed to be happening. I found his room and went in. I stopped abruptly at what I saw. I was expecting to find George in his room. Instead, I saw a room with four beds, and each one had someone in it. I scanned the faces looking for George. He was in the third bed down with his eyes closed; they all had their eyes closed, sleeping. Each bed had a chair next to it, along with a cart that held water cups and other personal odds and ends.

I quietly walked down to George's bedside and sat down. The chair was a hard, plastic chair. No one else had company, and all the curtains around the beds were open. I could hear all of the machines beeping to their own rhythm. Perhaps because my nerves were frayed, the sound was overwhelming to me, running along my nerves with a sharp needle. I reached out and put my hand on George's, which was warm and dry. My heart settled at the touch, relieved that he was still here with me. The turmoil of finding him like this overcame me, and tears started flowing out of my eyes. I put my head in my free hand, giving in to my emotions.

"Now, Hope, it's going to be alright. There, there," George said softly, patting my hand with his other hand. "You see, I'm perfectly fine. No need for tears."

I lifted my head and put my hand on top of ours piled together. "Oh George, I was so afraid when I heard! I thought that I might lose you, too. Even though Margie said you would be okay, I had to come see for myself." I was silent after that, relishing the warmth of his hands in mine. George didn't seem too eager to end the moment either. We sat that way until my back began to ache from the awkward lean.

As I pulled my hands away and yawned, George said, “Hope, I want to say something to you. I know that you’ve lost some important people in your life. First, your father. And then, just as tragic, your husband. And then your baby. I want to say that at some point, you are going to lose me, too.”

I looked straight at him. He was looking at where our hands used to be joined.

“George...”

“No. Let me finish. There is something important for you to know. I love you. Your father loved you. Your husband loved you. There is enough love from the three of us for you to live a lifetime on. I know that it may not seem it now, but one day, you are going to realize just how much you are loved. Right now, it feels as if they, and almost I, have abandoned you. Nothing could be further from the truth. You carry our love in your heart. You only need to remember. Remember all of the moments that we have spent talking, laughing, crying, or doing nothing. We chose to be with you. You are our Hope. You have our love within you, just waiting to be remembered. We’ve planted seeds in your heart for when times are difficult. Those seeds may take some watering and care, and even pruning, but they’re there inside you. It’s up to you to make them grow and bring fruit. Or you can kill them. They’ll die from sorrow, from not remembering all of the times that we spent with you. It’s your choice whether or not they bloom. I hope that you choose to care for them.”

I was stunned. No one had ever said anything like that to me before. It was my responsibility? I looked out the window, both longing to embrace what George had just said and fighting the desire to push the words out of my mind. I knew that they were true. But it was so easy just to allow the grief to overtake me. What he said implied that there would be work

involved to heal and to remember. Work was the last thing that I felt capable of when it came to my dad and Christopher and the baby. I sighed.

“George, I don’t feel ready to ‘garden my soul.’ I think that I’ll let the seeds rest for a bit.”

“Take care that you don’t neglect them for too long. Now, I’m sure that it will sadden you to know that you just missed Brian. He was here threatening to have me move in with him. If you distract him, maybe he’ll leave me alone,” George said, eyes twinkling.

“George...”

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