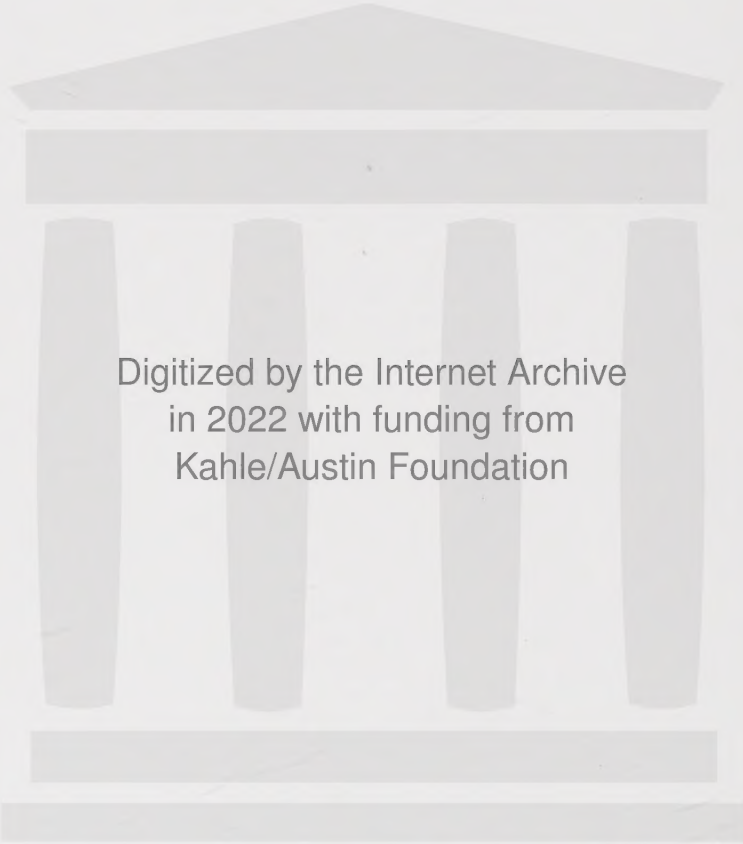


# MANIFESTING DREAMS

ROBIN STRACHAN



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# *Manifesting Dreams*





To Meredith,  
So glad you're  
part of our family!  
Robin

# *Manifesting Dreams*

ROBIN STRACHAN

iUniverse, Inc.  
Bloomington

# Manifesting Dreams

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To  
Lauren and Elizabeth  
May all your fondest dreams come true.





## *Acknowledgments*

---

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The town of Walkers Corner is fictional, but its characters, history, and descriptions have become so real to me, I assume that, like Brigadoon, the place must exist somewhere.

The process of writing this novel will be etched in my mind forever in some rather unusual ways, thanks to outrageous events that inevitably seem to occur whenever I’m in the company of the “play group” here in Johnstown. Thank you to all of my dear, funny, generous friends. Each of you demonstrates what it means to love unconditionally in good and not-so-good times. There are no fainting goats, no Beer Mountain, but

I trust you'll enjoy the story, anyway. And yes, now it's time to break out the Champagne.

And last, but certainly not least, thank you to all of my Angels for teaching me what matters most in life and for showing me the path I was born to follow.

## Chapter 1

---

THE SMELL OF FRESHLY MOWN GRASS lingered sweetly in the morning air as Carole Hannah Sherard hurried from the faculty and staff parking lot across the campus quadrangle. From the bell tower, she heard the resounding tones of *Morning Has Broken*, signaling to students that eight o'clock classes were now underway. The heels of her pumps clicked along the concrete sidewalk, sounding like hammer taps as she approached Aldrich Hall, a 1960s building that housed the university's administrative offices.

Pulling open the glass door, she stepped onto the polished tile of the entryway, stopping to wave at the switchboard operator before skipping up the stairs two at a time. As she made her way into the carpeted reception area marked *Office of the Vice President, University Foundation*, she exchanged greetings and light-hearted conversation with a few staff members and work-study students.

"Good morning, Vera," she said to her administrative assistant, taking an appreciative sniff of the profusion of blue hydrangeas on Vera's desk. "Mm, smells like spring in here."

Vera, whose skin appeared unnaturally orange from an ambitious spray tanning session, handed her a folder of memos and pink phone messages.

"Don't say anything. I already know I look like an oompa loompa," she grumbled, handing Carole Hannah a mug of steaming coffee. "Before you meet with the president this morning, Ellen needs to see you. She said the student phone campaign is off schedule because the

kids aren't showing up for work, and we're not going to meet goal. There could be layoffs."

"I'm sure Ellen never said there would be layoffs, Vera."

"There might be."

"There won't be layoffs. Stop thinking that." Carole Hannah stifled a laugh and flashed her assistant a teasing grin. "And, by the way, I wasn't going to say anything, except that you look positively glowing this morning."

Vera gave her a withering glance. "I'd laugh, but it's not in my job description."

With her dyed, jet-black hair teased inches high and tight white blouse, it was true that Vera bore a rather remarkable resemblance to an oompa loompa.

"Would you please buzz Ellen and ask her to stop by?"

Carole Hannah tucked her chin-length chestnut hair behind her ears and set her briefcase on the floor beside her desk. She scanned the paperwork in the folder, grimacing over a terse memo from the president about a major donor's concern that his fraternity had been placed on probation. Not surprisingly, the alumnus was more concerned about his fraternity's social status than any serious campus security or safety violations. The president, of course, was concerned about the threatened withdrawal of financial support from the wealthy alumnus.

Sighing, she turned on her laptop and watched as a flurry of e-mails appeared in the inbox. *What in the world?* Her eyes opened wide when she saw an e-mail alert from Kansas Trident Bank, notifying her that recent access to her checking account had been denied due to incorrect answers to security questions.

*If you believe you have received this message in error, please contact system administrator,* she read, mouthing the words under her breath as Ellen Hamilton, associate vice president for development, poked her head in the doorway.

"Hey, boss," Ellen said playfully, dropping her six-foot, lanky body into one of the chairs in front of Carole Hannah's desk.

In college, Ellen had been a star basketball player for a rival college in Missouri. Twenty-five years later, she still appeared out of her element in anything other than sweats and sneakers. But she was competent and



reliable in her role and had become a trusted friend and ally to Carole Hannah.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked when she saw her friend's furrowed brow.

"I'm not sure," Carole Hannah answered distractedly and began scrolling down the e-mails in her inbox. "I just got a message from my bank. It says something about incorrect answers to security questions. Do you really think someone would try to hack into my account?"

"Probably nothing to worry about," Ellen said, leaning back. "But it could be someone phishing for your real information. Don't respond back to that e-mail."

"I'm sure you're right. Oh, wait! Here are two more alerts." Now Carole Hannah was alarmed. "I probably need to call the bank and get whatever this is straightened out. But first, what's the problem with the alumni calls?"

Ellen plunked down a spreadsheet. "The call center is seriously behind on alumni solicitations. Five of the student callers got back late from the long weekend, so there were only about a hundred asks made the past two nights. The good news is that they should be caught up by Thursday. The bad news is that we still need to figure out where to get another \$300,000 before the fiscal year ends."

"Knowing you, it's already under control." She took a gulp of coffee, wincing when it burned her tongue and the roof of her mouth.

Ellen grinned. "Not exactly, but I do have a few ideas. We could go back to the class of 1959 and see if they want to honor someone—maybe one of their deceased members. In fact, I thought about doing that for all the reunion classes. We'll make a big deal at homecoming in the fall and dedicate something to them. We've got lots of unnamed sections of bleachers on the soccer field and a few naming opportunities in the rec center."

As Ellen outlined her proposed strategies for raising the necessary dollars, anxious butterflies swarmed in Carole Hannah's stomach. *Something is horribly wrong.* She took a deep breath in a futile attempt to keep the flutters at bay and tried to focus her attention.

"Go ahead with the plan for the anniversary classes. But let's also go after the MBAs who the dean took for his own solicitations. Remember,

he didn't want us to ask those people for gifts in November. He wanted to handle them himself, and--"

"He didn't follow through, as usual," Ellen interrupted. "He'll be mad if you point that out."

"I have no intention of saying anything about that. I don't have to because it's obvious the gifts aren't in. He may think he knows everything else in the world, but he doesn't understand fundraising."

She took another cautious sip of her coffee. "Go ahead and solicit all the MBAs, and don't worry about the dean. I'll announce at president's staff meeting this afternoon what we're doing. Trust me, there'll be a much bigger issue than the dean's bruised ego if we don't get the alumni to give before June thirtieth and fall short on the budget. Because of his procrastination, some of those donors will have missed an entire year of giving if we don't do something fast. The president will back me up on this."

"I know he will." Ellen raised her eyebrows. "He has never figured out how you nail the exact dollar goal you project every year. As long as the money comes in, he certainly isn't about to argue with your methods."

Carole Hannah shrugged. "How are business school donations overall for the annual fund?"

"They're still behind last year's numbers. *It's the economy, boys and girls*," Ellen said, mimicking the dean's pompous manner. "The average gift amount is down a few dollars, but the overall number of gifts and pledges is up slightly, so we could still pull this out by the end of June."

"We'll be ahead of the game, just like last year," Carole Hannah said mildly. "I predict we'll be up by twenty-two percent."

"Sayeth the psychic fundraiser," Ellen said, shaking her head. She grinned and picked up the spreadsheet. "I'll get on these solicitations right away."

After Ellen left, Carole Hannah shut her office door and phoned her personal banker, who listened without response when she told him her concerns about the e-mail alerts.

"Don't be alarmed," he said finally, "but someone did attempt to gain access to the account. You'll need to change your password and security questions. The tech department is looking into this, but

there are no withdrawals, so I don't think any harm's been done. We'll prosecute if we find out who did it."

"I can't imagine who would do such a thing," Carole Hannah said as she listened to his instructions. But a nagging feeling had taken root. After being assured again that no money had been withdrawn from the account and urged not to worry, she hung up the phone, confident that the bank had the situation well in hand.

At four thirty, as she prepared to leave for a meeting across campus, the phone on her desk rang.

"It's Kevin on line one," Vera announced over the intercom.

Carole Hannah picked up the phone and greeted her significant other of three years. "Hi, there," she said. "How's your day going?"

"Busy, as usual," he answered. "I've always got more irons in the fire than I can handle; you know that. I've been following up on some resumes I sent out last week, and all I can say is, I can be choosy." He paused. "Hey, this is kind of a weird thing to ask, but I've wracked my brain for two days trying to remember, and now it's really bugging me."

"What's that?" she asked, juggling her briefcase on her knee as she flipped the locks. She needed to get across campus to that meeting, but Kevin rarely called her at the office. He claimed Vera always gave him the third degree.

"For the life of me, I can't remember your mother's maiden name. I know that's an odd thing to wonder about, but you know how questions get stuck in your head, and you can't stop thinking about them? I also couldn't remember the name of your hometown."

Carole Hannah felt her stomach catapult into her throat as the gravity of Kevin's questions hit her.

"I have to go," she said and hung up on him.

Covering her mouth with both hands, a sound of barely muted anguish took her breath away, causing her legs to sway. Within moments, Vera appeared at her side and took her arm, sitting her down in the desk chair. Carole Hannah tried to speak, but no words came out. She was unable to hear anything except the pounding rush of blood as it left her head.

## Chapter 2

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FOR NEARLY TWO MONTHS, SHE COCOONED in the house, leaving only to go back and forth to work and on necessary errands. She cooked and filled the upstairs and downstairs freezers with Tuscan vegetable soup, her favorite comfort food; yet she ate almost none of it herself. With her daughters, Whitney and Riley, living away from home now, she spent long evenings on the couch, watching cooking shows with her patient hound dog, Florabelle, resting across her lap.

"At least you're always loyal to me."

The old dog let out a long-suffering sigh and licked her hand.

She thought back to the day over three years ago when she had been introduced to Kevin at Mendelssohn choir. He had just auditioned for the group and been assigned to the seat directly behind her. As they sang, she was attracted first by the rich baritone voice she heard and then by his tall good looks and smooth, polished style. They often stopped for a glass of wine or a latte after practices and gradually began spending more time together. Kevin was attentive, gentlemanly, and eager to please. So what if every date involved a two-fer coupon? He was careful with money, she rationalized, always looking to better himself.

It took almost two years for her to realize that he changed jobs frequently and had way too much time on his hands. He showed up more and more at her house, usually just in time for dinner, and occasionally helped with an uncomplicated indoor or outdoor chore that required no real effort. Mostly, though, he gave unsolicited advice. As he settled into her life (making it his life, too), Carole Hannah was



only vaguely aware of a subtle form of manipulation and control that had become a pattern in the relationship.

"I ordered new ceramic tile for the kitchen floor today," he announced one evening, handing her a sample square. "The price is right, and it'll add a lot of value to the house. I can supervise the installation. All you'll need to do is call them with your credit card number."

At first, she expressed annoyance that he had acted on his own without checking with her first, but when the expression on his face changed to wounded upset, she rationalized that Kevin had excellent taste and her best interests at heart. Another year went by as he talked of his plans for their future and the improvements they would make to "their" home.

During this time, there hadn't been a single moment when she questioned Kevin's devotion to her. She knew that he wasn't exactly a success in his finance and banking career and that he struggled to maintain steady employment, but that didn't mean he wasn't a hard worker or a decent guy.

"I'm too honest for my own good," he fumed when yet another job didn't work out. "I only point out what's in the company's best interests, and yet I'm the one they let go while guys with less education and skills get the promotions."

She had always taken his side, encouraging him not to shortchange his abilities or compromise his principles as one job after another ended due to whistle-blowing, unfair review policies, or outright bad management. Now that her eyes were open to Kevin's treachery, she knew that she had been entirely too trusting of him.

When she confronted him about his obvious attempts to gain access to her bank account, his reaction was unsettling.

"I'm hurt that you'd think my motives were anything but pure."

"How can trying to get into someone's bank account without their knowledge or permission be considered pure?" Carole Hannah asked him, her voice uncharacteristically sharp. "Kevin, I could press charges for what you did. The bank *will* prosecute if they find out." She folded her arms across her chest, blocking his attempt to embrace her.

A look that was half fear, half seething resentment flickered across his face for a split second. He recovered his composure quickly, but not

before she caught the thin-lipped smile of barely concealed contempt that appeared in its place.

"I'm sorry you were worried and upset," he said in a soothing tone, brushing off her indignation. "But you know I'd never do anything without good reason. I just thought that since we're moving toward a future together, I'd use my skills to oversee your financial welfare. You know I'm more qualified to manage your money. Let's face it: you don't have that specialized knowledge."

In the center of her forehead, between her eyebrows, Carole Hannah saw a yellow caution light turn red, followed by the sound of a slamming door. She also recognized that she had experienced these types of warning signs for several months—signs she had overlooked or ignored. Now Kevin's explanation fell on deaf ears.

She snorted in derision. "Kevin, I've always been very good at managing my money. That's not your role or your right. What you did was a crime. Do you even comprehend that?"

"Your concerns have been noted," he said with the breezy, patient tone he so often used with her. This time, though, it sounded patronizing and condescending, even to her ears. "Let's just forget it ever happened." He removed a bottle of merlot from the wine rack. "Why don't we have a glass of wine on the patio and talk about something else?"

"I don't think so. I'd like you to leave now."

"You don't *think* so? Let's not say anything we'll regret later," he said, his jaw stiffening. "Sweetheart, you're letting your emotions get the best of you. You've made your point; let it go now. We both know that we've been together too long to let one little misunderstanding derail our relationship." His chin jutted out slightly in a sneer, the lower teeth clearly visible. In his eyes, she saw ugliness, and she knew. *It won't be over until he says it's over.* A shudder ran up and down her spine.

"I'm saying it now, so make sure you're hearing me: you betrayed my trust. I am done with this relationship. Don't call me again."

"I'm not going to stand here and attempt to defend myself when you're clearly not in your right mind." He looked as if he might explode. "I'll call you tomorrow, when you're in a better mood."

*Time to play hard ball. Say it.*

"Kevin, don't underestimate me; I am very serious. If you contact me again or if I see you anywhere near this house, I *will* tell the bank

exactly what happened,” she said and cut off all communication with him.

For the next few weeks, she struggled with overwhelming feelings of embarrassment and shame at having settled for such an underachieving, dishonest man.

“I should have listened to my intuition. Stupid, stupid,” she said to herself, replaying all the times she’d had misgivings about him and overlooked them.

More and more, she found herself thinking of a time when her life stretched in front of her with infinite possibilities, back when she was a girl growing up in the small community of Walkers Corner in western Pennsylvania. She remembered happy times spent cooking in her family’s restaurant, hanging out with friends along the creek, and enjoying outdoor activities during four stunningly beautiful Pennsylvania seasons.

“I’m thinking of getting a home closer to my parents,” she confided to Ellen at lunch one day.

“Don’t make any decisions right away, Cee. You’ve been through a shock, but it’s not the end of the world. You’ll meet someone else, someone better for you.”

“Ellen, it isn’t just what happened with Kevin. To tell you the truth, I’m ready for a life makeover. I’d like some balance, a chance to do more cooking, maybe even write that cookbook I’ve been talking about for so long.”

“Why don’t you just take a little more time off? You never use all your vacation.”

“How can I? This job doesn’t allow for enough time off that I can have that kind of life. I’d love to spend more time with my family, someplace where I can be myself,” she said, wistfully twirling a strand of hair around her fingers. “Besides, Mom and Dad are in their mid-seventies now, and I know they could use some help with the business. Maybe it’s time for me to be there for them.”

As she contemplated selling her large suburban house to buy a smaller place nearby for her solitary life, she surfed real estate websites. When she entered *Walkers Corner, Pennsylvania* into one real estate company’s website, a red Cape Cod surrounded by mature trees and meticulous landscaping suddenly appeared on the screen.

Carole Hannah stopped breathing as she read the property description. The charming cottage was familiar to her, a house she'd known and loved for years. It was the long-time home of her parents' best friends, a place where she had played happily as a child. She also recognized that it was this very house that always came to mind whenever she thought of Walker's Corner. Glancing at the price, she was amazed to see that it cost less than a third of what a similar house sold for in suburban Kansas. She eagerly clicked through the online slideshow to review all the photos, smiling at the sight of the gabled bedrooms and other cottage architectural features she had long admired.

"This is where I belong," she said with newfound excitement before sending an e-mail to the Realtor. There, waiting right in front of her, was her destiny.

\*\*\*\*\*

"That house is solid as a rock. It was built in the 1940s by old Tom Whittaker before all these pre-fabricated jobs started going up," Gil Sherard said to reassure his daughter after she told him she wanted to buy the charming cottage. "It would be a good home for you and Miss Florabelle."

Carole Hannah's hectic work schedule didn't allow for a fast trip halfway across the country for a home viewing. Besides, everyone knew the house would sell fast.

"If there was ever a time to take a calculated risk, it's now," she told her parents. "Wish me luck."

"There's a job waiting here for you," her mother said. "We sure can use your help in the tavern."

"I can already see you in the house," Gil said, bringing a quick, knowing laugh from his wife.

Taking a leap of faith that all would be well, Carole Hannah purchased the house sight unseen, celebrating over flutes of Champagne, dark chocolates, and fresh strawberries with Ellen.

Within weeks, she sold half the furniture in her oversized house, keeping only the pieces she loved and that had happy memories, and made the thousand-mile drive home with the dog snoozing in the back seat. She had faith that her house in an affluent Kansas suburb would sell soon enough.



Once these events were in motion, however, she found herself facing a hard truth about her adult life: for over twenty-five years, she hadn't been truly happy. Instead, she had merely drifted along, reacting to events and the expectations of others, doing what seemed sensible and secure.

Over the years, as she worked long, stressful hours directing fund development and alumni relations at the university, she often reminisced about the small community of Walkers Corner in the Laurel Highlands region of Pennsylvania. She imagined herself cooking with her mother and tending bar with her father in the Sherard family's well-established business, the Creekside Tavern and Inn.

It was a dream unfulfilled; that is, until Kevin's startling betrayal ignited a series of precipitous events that ended with the discovery of the red cottage online and cleared the pathway for her to realize her dreams.

"Maybe this whole problem with Kevin was a blessing in disguise," she told her parents. "I'm finally moving forward to make serious choices for my life." As she said it, she wondered what had taken her so long.

On the day she shared her plans with her daughters, Whitney, twenty-five, and Riley, twenty, their reactions were predictable.

"I never liked that Kevin!" Riley said, eyes flashing in anger. "I hate him because what he did is driving you away!" Her chin trembled, and Carole Hannah reached out to draw her near, stroking her long, dark hair.

Whitney took a deep breath as her eyes calmly met Riley's. Taking her mother's hand, she said, "It was rotten of that rat bastard Kevin to do what he did, and it makes me mad, too. But you have a right to do what makes you happy. We wish you'd stay here, but whatever you decide, it'll be fine, Momma. Besides, it'll give us a chance to see Grandma and Grandpa more often."

"Thank you, honey," Carole Hannah said, amazed and touched at Whitney's maturity. "I guess you understand more than I realized. I knew you girls weren't fond of Kevin, and as it turns out, you were right: he *was* shifty. I don't know why I was so unwilling to see the real Kevin."

With a lump forming in her throat, she paused to carefully consider her next words. "I think it's important for you to understand something.

What Kevin did was a catalyst for my decision, but I think deep down, I've wanted to go back to Walkers Corner for a long time. Grandma and Grandpa are getting to an age where they could use some help, and I'd like to be there for them. Please believe me when I tell you this decision is being made for all the right reasons. It's really what I want."

"We understand. Don't we, Riley? Do what you need to do, Mom," Whitney said as her new fiance, Bo, stood by in quiet support.

Carole Hannah smiled her thanks at Bo.

Riley, a junior in college, sat silent and guarded as her sister spoke, but it was clear from the stormy expression on her face that she struggled with her response. Finally, she let out a deep breath.

"Mom, every time we go to Pennsylvania, you start to relax as soon as we see the mountains." She curled up against her mother. "I know you're going to be happy living near Grandma and Grandpa. I just worry that we'll hardly see you when you move away."

"We won't let that happen," Carole Hannah said fiercely. "I can fly here to see you, and you can come to Walkers Corner anytime you have a break from school. Or we can meet at Whitney's apartment in Chicago. Let's make plans to get together for a long weekend in October or November, whenever all of us can arrange time away."

In a conversation with Ellen the next day at lunch, Carole Hannah shared some of the fears that bubbled up occasionally, despite her attempts to remain positive. "These days, I feel anything but confident in my ability to make good decisions," she admitted, cheeks flaming. "I worry that uprooting my life here to move back to a place I left so long ago is yet another questionable choice, just like overlooking the problems with Kevin for so long."

Ellen pushed a plate of seasoned curly fries, their favorite emotional eating food, across the table. "Here, this half is yours." She shook her head. "I know this feels like a sucker punch to the gut, Cee, but you couldn't really have known how manipulative and dishonest he was. He seemed like a decent guy. We all thought that."

Yanking the napkin from her lap, Carole Hannah dabbed at the tears that welled up. "I'm ashamed that my daughters saw this happen to me."

"Your daughters are still young," Ellen said, wrapping her arms around her friend. "You've just shown them what it means to be human,

to be a woman who loved someone and got hurt. It's a lesson every woman learns, eventually."

Not everyone at the university understood or supported her decision to resign and move away.

"What if you end up regretting this?" Vera asked in her typical blunt fashion as she helped her pack up her office. "Couldn't you just consider a leave of absence, instead? And what will happen to me? Am I gonna have to report to Ellen? She's bossier than you are."

"Don't worry, Vera," Carole Hannah said with a heavy sigh. "You'll be fine, and yes, Ellen will take my place while they do a search. I have no doubt she'll be named to the position, though. Please try and understand that it's time for me to do something I really want to do." She shrugged. "Honestly, this will probably turn out to be the best decision I've ever made."

In moments of solitude, as she spent time packing and preparing to move, Carole Hannah acknowledged that Walkers Corner wasn't exactly a hot spot. It was likely she'd miss the conveniences that bigger city living provided, among other things. What if this decision was simply an overreaction to one emotionally draining event, and she ended up bored and miserable?

Walkers Corner was about fifty miles east of Pittsburgh, too far to make it a bedroom community for job commuters, especially during the long, harsh winters. The town had been built along Doe Run, a six-mile creek that flowed into the Conemaugh River. Now that the creek had been cleaned up of long-time pollution from area mines, Doe Run provided the town's major source of income as tourists flocked there to canoe and fish in the spring, summer, and fall, and to bike along the nearby trail. In the late fall and winter, scores of snowshoe enthusiasts and cross-country skiers brought revenue to the pinched local economy.

"Without tourism from Doe Run, Walkers Corner would be a ghost town," she had often heard her father say.

The town had been settled in the late 1800s by Scottish immigrants, distant relatives of Carole Hannah's family, the Walkers of Aberdeen. Many of the Walkers' relatives and friends settled in the misty mountains and valleys so reminiscent of their Scottish homeland. As a result, the town was predominantly Scottish and overwhelmingly Presbyterian.

She vaguely remembered meeting her great-grandfather, head of local operations for the coal company. In those days, the company owned most of the real estate in town, and Great-Grandfather Sherard, his wife, and children lived privileged lives in the “big house” (a term coined by the miners, who rented their company-owned homes). Eventually, the local coal operation merged with another company in West Virginia and closed, suspending livelihoods for hundreds of families. Over the course of the next sixty years, small businesses opened to replace the coal company, but the economic boom in Walkers Corner was long past. The “big house” now housed the county’s historical society and a law practice.

The night before she left for Pennsylvania, Carole Hannah slept fitfully, waking in a heated sweat after dreaming she was on the rain-swollen creek in Walkers Corner, struggling to paddle a canoe through a swift current. She had never canoed in water this fast or deep before, and she feared capsizing or going through dangerous white water. A man whose face she couldn’t see helped steer a straight course, offering words of encouragement. She was glad he was with her, but had no idea who he was or where the current was taking them.

“How do we know we’ll be okay?” she asked, already struggling to make sense of the dream.

“Just go with the flow,” he told her, and then she woke up.



## Carole Hannah's Tuscan Vegetable Soup

- 2 large chicken breasts
- 1 14.5 oz. can artichoke hearts, drained and diced
- 4 cups chicken broth
- 1 28 oz. can diced tomatoes in juice
- 1 ½ cup water
- 1 14.5 oz. can chickpeas, drained and rinsed
- 2 tbsp. fresh lemon juice
- ¼ cup soy sauce
- ½ cup chopped sun-dried tomatoes
- 1 ½ tsp. dried basil
- 2 tsp. garlic powder
- 1 ½ tsp. dried thyme
- ¼ tsp. freshly ground black pepper

In a large skillet over medium-high heat, combine soy sauce, 1 tsp. garlic powder, and water. Add chicken breasts and cook until liquid is reduced to about ½ cup. Remove chicken from skillet and slice into bite-size pieces.

Combine chicken broth, tomatoes, chickpeas, chicken-soy cooking liquid, artichoke hearts, lemon juice, thyme, basil, remaining garlic powder, and black pepper in a large soup pot. Cook for 1 hour over medium heat. Reduce heat and simmer for another hour.

## Chapter 3

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IT WAS THE COTTAGE OF HER dreams, the cottage she'd envisioned so often, it already felt like home.

As she parked in the driveway, a mixture of relief at finally being here, coupled with excitement at the sight of her dream home, flooded over her. After all the weeks of planning and packing, she was finally here, and the cottage was even cuter than she remembered. The former owners had described the Cape Cod's fresh paint as classic cottage burgundy with birch-white on the trim and shutters. Built with a sloping, triangular entryway, the cottage had the perfect spot on the front porch for a white ladder-back rocking chair. An etched crystal oval glistened in a rainbow of colors from the center of the front door.

Carole Hannah sighed with pleasure as she inserted the house key she'd been given at closing and pushed open the front door of the first house she had ever purchased on her own. She thought fleetingly of the large house in Kansas, a For Sale sign still posted in front, and gulped down a momentary feeling of panic. What if the house in Kansas didn't sell fast enough? How long could her savings hold out while paying two mortgages?

Florabelle trailed obediently behind, circling and sniffing the perimeter of the porch.

"Welcome to your new house," Carole Hannah said, fondly stroking Florabelle's floppy, velvet ears. The old dog leaned heavily against her and licked one bare knee.

As soon as the front door opened, Florabelle darted inside to

investigate. Carole Hannah dropped her purse on the window seat in the front room and wandered through the spacious living room with its golden oak floors and crown molding. Through the arched doorway, she caught sight of the dining room and the wall of built-in bookcases—perfect for her cookbook collection.

She clapped her hands in delight when she saw the Pullman-style kitchen painted a rich tomato red with charcoal-colored granite countertops, creamy-white cabinets with brushed stainless steel knobs, a pressed tin backsplash, and sage-green porcelain tile floors.

“This is gorgeous,” she said with a satisfied smile. “I wouldn’t change a thing.”

Florabelle waited patiently, her long tail thumping on the floor, until Carole Hannah unlocked the kitchen door that led to a second floor porch overlooking the forest. As the dog sniffed her way around, Carole Hannah propelled herself back and forth with one sandaled foot on the white hanging swing. The aroma of lush, overripe vegetation from the nearby woods filled her head, along with the high-pitched buzz of insects.

Lifting the damp hair from her neck, she wiped away drops of perspiration that sprang to her upper lip and counted her blessings that the house had overhead fans. Even so, she’d have to get used to living without central air-conditioning for a while. Fanning her face, she headed down the stone steps leading to the back yard with Florabelle close at her heels.

“Lots of space for you to run around and play,” she pointed out.

Florabelle trotted toward the far end of the yard and splashed across a small stream that trickled downhill near the entrance to the forest. She looked back at Carole Hannah, a question mark on her doggy face.

“Go ahead. Watch out for crayfish.” Smiling indulgently, she watched the dog bend her head to drink, lapping up water from the mountain-fed stream before trotting back. Florabelle paused along the way to sniff flowers, reminding Carole Hannah of the peace-loving bull in the children’s tale, *Ferdinand the Bull*.

The property was much larger than she remembered. An acre of mostly shaded grass extended behind the house into a three-hundred-acre state park. Next to the house, a dirt pathway dotted with colorful wildflowers in blue, lavender, yellow, pink, and white led from the

backyard along a split-rail fence that had seen better days, but was still picturesque in its rustic detail. Carole Hannah recognized the purplish-blue gentian, delicate periwinkle blossoms, white Queen Anne's lace, yellow sneezeweed, and pink asters by sight. The identity of the other flowers was a mystery.

"Granny Nell would know the names of all these plants," she said to Florabelle as they turned and went back toward the house. "We should ask her."

Her father's mother, Nell Sherard, was a master gardener who nurtured indigenous plants of every species inside and around her home. In her spacious greenhouse just off the kitchen, she cultivated an astonishing array of flowers, vegetables, and herbs, many of which she dried and used in natural remedies for everything from skin rashes to fevers. The tavern benefited from fresh herbs year round from Nell's bounty. She lived in a two-story yellow bungalow next to the hiking and biking trail that ran alongside Doe Run at its deepest point.

Everywhere Carole Hannah looked, she found something new to delight her senses. Since she had managed the sale long-distance, this was her first visit to her new home. There had been no need to see the house ahead of time since there were plenty of photos on the company's website, and she still had fond memories of the cottage and its sloping location from days of sled-riding there as a child.

As they resumed their tour of the house, Florabelle flopped down with a groaning sigh in a puddle of late afternoon sunshine.

Carole Hannah stood with hands on her hips, envisioning placement of the wicker desk, its matching chair, and the tall etagere with its four shelves for all of her books and eclectic music collection.

"I think this bedroom will be my office," she announced to the dog. "I'm sure all of the furniture we brought with us will fit."

Florabelle wrinkled her brow, her usual concerned look.

Next to the downstairs bedroom was a bathroom with an oak floor and old-fashioned, claw-footed tub and shower. Carole Hannah took a quick look at her reflection in the full-length mirror and frowned. The two-day trip from eastern Kansas, nearly eighteen hours of driving, had taken its toll on her appearance, leaving bluish circles like fresh bruises under her eyes. She peered carefully at her heart-shaped face, now free of makeup except for a quick brush of mascara to highlight her blue

eyes. Her chestnut hair, normally blown straight below her chin, was settling into weird cowlicks in the extreme humidity.

Turning sideways, she stared critically at her body, noting the slight tummy she'd never been able to shed completely after the girls were born. Despite her mostly sedentary job and the addition of a few extra pounds, Carole Hannah was physically fit for a woman of forty-nine, thanks to regular exercise that included swimming and walking. Even with the usual bumps and bulges that seemed to come inevitably to women in their forties, she felt that the older she got, the more she *liked* her looks.

As she made her way up the steps to the second floor, she saw that the two upstairs bedrooms featured alcove areas that were perfect for a comfortable chair and reading lamp. The roomy walk-in closets were lined with real cedar, and there were built-in shelves for shoes and handbags. She sniffed in appreciation, noticing that the oak floors were spotlessly clean with a faint, lingering aroma of Murphy's oil soap from the former owner's recent cleaning. The old-fashioned lace curtains lining the windows would have to be tied back, however. She preferred to look at the trees in all their seasonal glory.

She stood in the north window, admiring a massive blue spruce that provided shade to that side of the house. Already, she could imagine herself curled up in her favorite overstuffed chair by that window, a good book and a cup of tea in hand.

"Home," she said, breathing a deep sigh of contentment, and hugged herself.

On the sprawling lower level of the house, she found a laundry room adjoining a pantry and wine cellar. The former owners, ardent home winemakers, had left their wine-making equipment and several boxes of empty bottles for the new owner. Carole Hannah already knew how to make wine from years of helping her parents prepare their own homemade vintages. It was tradition in the summer for members of the Sherard family to pitch in to help bottle all of the new tavern wines.

To her delight, when she opened the back door from the basement, she found a shaded red brick patio with a breezeway between the house and the two-car garage. With the addition of a new fire pit from the Home Depot, she imagined chilly evenings spent on the patio with a glass of wine or a cup of herbal tea.



The moving van wasn't scheduled to arrive until the next morning, so after taking a mental inventory of where her belongings would be placed in each room, Carole Hannah and Florabelle got back into their Subaru wagon, which was still loaded to the roof with boxes and suitcases. Rolling down the windows so she could breathe in the fragrant mountain air, she drove the short distance to the Creekside Tavern and Inn. There, she parked in a shady spot under an old tree, opened the back windows the entire way, and reassured her tired animal that she'd be back soon.

"Sorry, no puppies allowed in the bar," she said, kissing the tip of the dog's long nose.

The main structure of the Creekside Tavern and Inn was a former three-story house with a spacious, federal-style porch. Over the years, renovations had been made as the business grew, with the latest addition being a large banquet room that could be partitioned off for smaller functions. During warmer months, tavern customers clamored for tables on the porch and shaded patio facing the creek. The indoor dining room featured eight booths around the perimeter and twenty-two tables that remained full from mid-morning through late evening. A polished oak bar with seating for sixteen was generally packed from mid-afternoon until well after midnight. Most weekends, there was standing room only.

Throughout the tavern, antique dish and sideboard cabinets displayed charming collections of china, Depression glassware, and painted teapots. Paintings by Sandy Sherard, Carole Hannah's younger sister, were displayed on every available wall space, where patrons could appreciate and arrange to buy them.

It was only four thirty, but diners already filled the patio tables while the bar grew busier with regulars who had been coming predictably early for happy hour every day for as long as Carole Hannah could remember.

"Hi ... Good to see you ... How are you?" She quietly greeted several customers she had known since childhood, winking conspiratorially and holding her finger to her lips as she waited for her father to notice her.

When Gil Sherard caught sight of his oldest daughter, he threw down the towel he was using to wipe glasses and greeted her with a bear hug and a smacking kiss on the lips.

“Good to have you home, honey,” he said, his face beaming.

Carole Hannah stood back to get a good look at her handsome father, his hair mostly white now, but with a face that remained unlined and youthful. At seventy-four, Gil Sherard was remarkably fit for his age.

“It’s probably all that heavy lifting of kegs and twenty-four packs,” he joked self-deprecatingly if anyone complimented him on his physique. He did seem a little shorter to Carole Hannah these days, although she guessed this had more to do with all those early childhood memories looking up at him.

“Did everything go okay at your house closing?” Gil asked. “What do you think of your new place?”

“Everything went fine. After I got the key, Florabelle and I went straight over there. Dad, it’s so much bigger and nicer than I remember, and Florabelle loved the backyard. By the way, she’s out in the car. Do you mind if I take her a cheeseburger later for a special treat?”

“We’ll make it a quarter-pounder. That dog is family, too,” Gil remarked jovially and went in search of his wife.

Connie Sherard burst through the swinging doors from the kitchen to embrace Carole Hannah as only a mother can. “You made good time getting here!” she exclaimed, adjusting a barrette in her chin-length hair, now more noticeably silver than last year. She wore a pair of trim navy slacks and a pink polo shirt over which an apron proclaimed *Creekside Tavern—for all the good food you remember*.

“Are you hungry?”

Carole Hannah grinned. This was how her mother expressed love: by cooking and feeding everyone in sight. It was a trait Carole Hannah had inherited and that now she planned to embrace full-time.

“Actually, I am a little hungry, Mom. Got any wedding soup?”

“Of course,” her mother answered briskly. “That’s always one of our soups of the day, although we’ve also got a nice bean with bacon that Chef Jim just made.”

“Italian wedding, please,” Carole Hannah said happily, boosting herself up onto a bar stool. Gil brought her a glass of iced tea with sprigs of fresh mint as they chatted about the trip and her first visit to the new house. She knew if she succumbed to anything stronger than tea, she’d

doze off. The afternoon light was fading now, and she thought longingly of a lavender bubble bath and a good night's sleep.

"Dad, I'll be in the day after tomorrow to start work—after the movers come and I get settled a bit," she said. "I'm anxious to get back in the kitchen with Mom."

"You take your time, honey," Gil answered. "Althea is willing to put in a few hours to help out in the mornings—that is, when your brother isn't taking up all her time with church stuff."

Carole Hannah chuckled. Her older brother, Reuben, was pastor of Doe Run Presbyterian Church, which boasted a congregation of slightly over three hundred. Located on Main Street, the building was widely acclaimed for its beautiful facade constructed out of river rocks in various shades of sand, chocolate, and reddish-brown, topped with a tall white steeple. With such a large number of elderly members in his church, no doubt Reuben was making his afternoon hospital and home visits.

Reuben and his wife, Althea, had been happily married for thirty years and had three grown children and a grandson. Their youngest daughter, Holly, mother of six-year-old Evan, worked as a waitress at the tavern.

Patient and good-humored, with an amazing flair for knitting and baking, Althea was always willing to lend a hand at the tavern while juggling housework and the endless demands of being a small-town minister's wife with grace and ease.

"Althea's been helping out as much as she can," Gil said. "I've been real busy lately while we renovate the third floor for more guest rooms. By the way, you're already registered to stay tonight with Florabelle in one of the rooms upstairs. Just make sure she goes in and out the back door so customers don't start imagining dog hair in their food."

Carole Hannah yawned and stretched her arms over her head. "Florabelle is always a lady. You won't even know she's here."

The Creekside Tavern featured four en suite rooms on the second floor for overnight guests. The third floor was an open dormitory-style area now being renovated into three smaller rooms with baths. Especially at holiday times, when Walkers Corner families welcomed returning children and grandchildren, the bed-and-breakfast part of the business had been a good return on investment.

“We’ll let you be soup wench for a while, until you learn where things are in your mother’s kitchen,” Gil said, winking.

Carole Hannah smiled. With its unlimited, comforting possibilities, soups were her specialty. It was just like her dad to know instinctively what would make her feel most at home in her new role. He had the Scottish Sight, as Granny Nell called it—a highly developed sense of intuition. It ran on that side of the family and was one of the reasons Carole Hannah felt so close to her father. They always understood each other without speaking.

Connie placed a steaming bowl of Italian wedding soup with its traditional acini di pepe pasta the size of seed pearls; tiny, savory herbed meatballs that were a mixture of lean ground beef and turkey; and spinach and diced carrots simmered in a fragrant chicken broth. A chunk of Althea’s honey, whole-wheat flaxseed bread, and a salad of baby greens with the house tangy cider vinaigrette rounded out the meal. Suddenly Carole Hannah was ravenous.

As she tore off a chunk of bread and dived into the soup, she looked up. “Mom, I hope you’ll let me try my hand at some new recipes.”

Connie, who was already bustling back to the kitchen to fill two orders, called out, “Anything on the menu, except my pierogies and pigs in a blanket, is open for discussion.”

That night, Carole Hannah slept in the blue-and-yellow guest room upstairs. A cool night breeze rustled the leaves in the tree outside the window, causing the curtains to flutter. For a while, she listened to the faint voices of tavern customers talking in low tones outside. Then there was silence, except for the reassuring country sounds of cicadas and crickets. The four-poster queen-size bed had a firm mattress, smooth sheets, and a plush blanket that felt like a caress next to her skin. She curled up under the blanket, listening to the dog’s soft snores, and thought about how familiar and good it was to be here. Before she knew it, she was sound asleep.

## Creekside Tavern Italian Wedding Soup

1/2 lb. lean ground beef  
1/2 lb. lean ground turkey  
1 egg, beaten  
1 cup acini di pepe pasta  
10 cups chicken broth  
3 tbsp. seasoned whole-wheat bread crumbs  
1 pkg. frozen spinach, defrosted  
1/2 cup onions, minced  
3 tbsp. Parmesan cheese  
1/2 cup carrots, diced  
1 tsp. dried basil  
1/2 tsp. garlic powder  
1/2 tsp. onion salt

Mix together ground beef, turkey, and egg. Add bread crumbs, Parmesan, basil, garlic powder, and onion salt. Use a melon ball scoop or teaspoon to make mini meat balls. In a large soup pot, bring 10 cups of water to a boil. Add the meatballs and cook for 10 minutes. Remove with slotted spoon and set them aside. Dispose of cooking water.

In a soup pot which has been cleaned of grease, add chicken broth, frozen spinach, diced onions, and diced carrots. Bring to a boil. Add meatballs and acini di pepe pasta. Continue cooking for 15 minutes, lower heat to simmer, and cook for 1 hour.



## Chapter 4

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AS SOON AS FIRST LIGHT ENTERED the room, Carole Hannah crept silently out of bed and munched on one of the cranberry-oatmeal bars she had brought with her on the trip. Sinking into the comfortable depths of the old wingback chair next to the window, she placed her bare feet flat on the floor, closed her eyes, and began breathing slowly, in for four counts and out for six, as she prepared for morning meditation. Within a few minutes of deep, rhythmic breathing, she saw the familiar swirls of violet, green, and indigo behind her eyelids, sensed the delicious feeling of slipping into the theta state—that in-between state of mind where inspirations and thoughts become real.

As random images drifted into her mind, she acknowledged and released them, continuing the breath work that helped still her thoughts. Now it was time to create a scene in her mind that she most wanted. At this moment, her innermost desire was simply contentment, serenity, and security in her home and work life. She envisioned herself happily cooking in the tavern's kitchen and creating new recipes for the cookbook.

Softly, so as not to disturb Florabelle or guests in adjoining rooms, she made a soft, melodic sound of "Ah." She allowed the sound to flow out with her expelled breath, then took another deep breath and repeated the sound. Once more, she sang, "Ah," the sound of gratitude, praise, and creation. She continued imagining scenes of happiness in her life until it was time to come back to a fully conscious state.

After meditation, she always did affirmations. *I am enjoying my new life in Walkers Corner. My former home is in the process of selling easily to people who will love it and appreciate it, as I have. My new work brings me fulfillment, comfort, and security. I enjoy knowing that my children are healthy and happy in their lives.*

With the sun fully overhead now, she felt the familiar bliss that accompanied this special time in her day. She could hear birds chirping and twittering in the tree outside her window and smell the recently mown grass. Screeching brakes and slamming doors announced the arrival of a truck delivering food supplies to the tavern's back entrance. Later in the morning, the movers would arrive at the cottage to deliver her furniture, and she wanted to get there a little early. As she hurried to take a shower, it occurred to her that the life she had dreamed about was finally about to begin.

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*To: EllenH*

*From: CookOntheGo*

*Subject: I'm here!*

*Hi from PA! I got here late afternoon on Monday, but didn't get my e-mail hooked up until this morning. The movers came on Tuesday, and I'm happy to report that everything is mostly in place, although there are still a few boxes in every room, except the kitchen, of course. You know, the kitchen is always my top priority.*

*My sister, Sandy, dropped by last night with a housewarming gift that she painted just for me. It's a watercolor of a woman paddling a kayak on white water. She says it's not me, but I like to imagine it's me in that red kayak.*

*Glad to hear the big alumni event went off without a hitch, although I bet by the time all the staff hours and expenses are tallied, the event won't make any real money. I know, I know. Your hands are tied, as mine were. It must be stubbornness or*

*an unwillingness to admit defeat that keeps the president from calling it quits on that tired, old event. Even the volunteers are sick of it. They'd probably all rather write a check and stay home.*

*Ellen, you should see the good-looking guy who comes into our bar every afternoon! His name is Jake, and he's (get this) a chainsaw artist. He makes the most amazing sculptures using a chainsaw. Jake likes my niece, Holly, who waits tables. Unfortunately, Holly is a wounded bird (her husband left her just before their son, Evan, was born) and when Jake talks to her, she skitters away. Anyway, Chainsaw Boy hangs out at the bar in the afternoons and moons over Holly, who pretends she has no idea he exists. The funny thing is that I have a feeling they'd be perfect for each other.*

*Meanwhile, I'm planning to start my cookbook tomorrow morning with the first recipe, Tuscan Vegetable Soup. It was quite a hit when we introduced it as one of our soups of the day.*

*Write back soon and let me know what's going on with everyone.*

*Miss you!*

*Cee*

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The Creekside Tavern kitchen was spacious enough to accommodate three chefs working side by side, and outfitted with enough pots, pans, and skillets to meet each cook's particular needs. This was all due to head chef Connie Sherard, a model of culinary efficiency, who juggled her own cooking tasks while supervising the kitchen and wait staff. She never broke a sweat, raised her voice, or lost patience as she coordinated the preparation of multiple recipes and filled customer orders in record time.

When Carole Hannah arrived early for her first day on the job, she was unceremoniously handed an apron and hairnet.

"I think we'll let you start out prepping," Connie said. "You can start tossing salad greens, chopping vegetables, making sauces, and marinating the meats. Make sure we have enough bread, rolls, and desserts on hand, too."

Her eyes softened when she saw the dazed look on her daughter's face. "I'm really glad you're here, sweetie," she said before blowing her a kiss and hurrying off to check the inventory of pantry supplies.

Carole Hannah surveyed the kitchen with its gleaming stainless-steel gas stoves, mammoth refrigerator, and industrial dishwasher, and sighed with a mixture of excitement and dread. Now that her first day on the job was at hand, she couldn't help wondering if this sudden change of career was such a good idea. It had been years since she'd worked in the kitchen, and the tavern was busier than ever. However, since this clearly was not the time for second-guessing decisions, she tucked her hair into the net, tied on the apron, and got to work.

The tavern purchased locally grown produce, meats, and cheeses whenever possible, and sometimes outsourced the preparation of other specialty menu items, such as desserts and breads, to local businesses. Nothing was served, however, unless it passed strict taste tests.

"Each cook is responsible for the end product," Connie said, walking by the counter where Carole Hannah was mixing sauces and dressings. "If something doesn't look or taste just right, we don't serve it, period." She tasted the bubbling barbeque sauce with a spoon. "Don't be nervous about adding cayenne; there's not enough bite to that batch." She added a liberal shake of red pepper to the sauce and moved on.

As a teenager, Carole Hannah had enjoyed cooking with her mother, since it allowed her busy mind to focus while she completed her kitchen chores. Numerous term papers were inspired by thoughts that came during routine vegetable chopping or dough kneading.

When she was finished with her assigned duties, Connie laid a firm, gentle hand on her back.

"Nice job and pretty fast, too. Would you like to come up with a new soup of the day? If we don't have an ingredient, just tell Dad and he'll get it for you on his way in."

Delighted at this vote of confidence, Carole Hannah kissed her mother on the cheek. "I think I'll make one of my own recipes, Tuscan vegetable soup."



As she chopped artichoke hearts, diced sun-dried tomatoes, and minced fresh garlic, she braised chicken breasts in a mixture of soy sauce, garlic, lemon juice, and water. When the chicken was cooked, she chopped it into bite-size pieces and added it, along with the remainder of the soy cooking liquid, to the other ingredients in a huge pot of chicken broth.

Within a half hour, the fragrant aroma attracted her father. Gil appeared in the doorway, sniffed the kitchen appreciatively, and accepted the tasting spoon Carole Hannah held out for him.

"Yes, I think we'll keep the new cook," he said, leaning in to kiss her forehead.

The lunchtime crowd began filtering in at eleven o'clock, and all available tables and booths quickly filled. As multiple orders started arriving in the kitchen, Carole Hannah felt swarms of butterflies roil up in her stomach. She took a deep breath and grabbed the first ticket for table nine: four Italian wedding soup and club sandwich platters with kettle-cooked chips.

"Today, we have Holly and Louise serving in the dining room, along with two part-timers, Cathy and Jean," her mother said, pointing to the time cards on a rack on the wall. "I like to keep one more server than I think we'll need, in case someone calls off at the last minute. We know we can keep 'em busy. When things start to slow down a little, they can sweep up, fold napkins, and set tables. At the end of their shift, they'll bring their time cards for one of us to sign."

Carole Hannah nodded, recognizing that her mother was providing her with on-the-job management training. For the next three hours, she and Connie cooked and filled orders nonstop. After the onslaught of lunch customers, they began preparing for the dinner rush.

By mid-afternoon, Carole Hannah's legs and feet throbbed with exhaustion, but there seemed to be no end to Connie's energy as she moved around the kitchen mixing, sautéing, making sandwiches, and flipping burgers and garlicky kielbasa on the grill.

The Creekside Tavern featured a menu of regional favorites, including the time-honored pigs in a blanket (cabbage rolls filled with seasoned ground meat), pierogies (potato-filled pasta dumplings pan-fried in butter and onions), and smoky kielbasa and sauerkraut over whipped mashed potatoes. Connie's barbecued ribs and wings were



famous for miles around, and there was an ever-changing assortment of hoimemade soups, sandwiches, and wraps. There were no finer burgers to be found anywhere than at the Creekside Tavern: thick patties on Ciabatta rolls with grilled onions, sharp cheddar cheese, center-cut bacon, or any number of other favorite toppings. In addition, there were homemade desserts including gob cake (a chocolate cake layered with creamy filling), towering lemon meringue pie, assorted fruit and custard pies, and skillet-baked chocolate chip cookies served warm with vanilla bean ice cream.

"It's been a long time since I worked like this," Carole Hannah remarked, wiping her forehead with the back of her sleeve as she spooned red-skinned potato salad onto a plate.

"You'll get used to it," Connie reassured her. "Business has really picked up the past several years, but there's a rhythm to our busy times. If you need help, just ask for it. Jim, our evening cook, will get here at three thirty and stay until midnight, so you'll be done here by seven. Dad and I stay until five o'clock to make sure everything is on track, and then we go home for our dinner."

By late afternoon, a handful of regular customers perched on stools around the bar, sipping frosty mugs of beer and snacking on buttered popcorn and ranch-seasoned pretzel nuggets. At four o'clock, Carole Hannah left the kitchen to relieve her father so he could take care of bookkeeping before heading home for his dinner.

"Everything going okay for you?" he asked, eyeing her with fatherly concern. "You look beat."

"I'm slower at filling orders than I should be. I promise I'll get faster."

He gave her a fatherly squeeze. "Mom says you're doing just great. We're so grateful you're here, honey."

"Thanks, Dad." Tears welled up as she recognized that, in his usual way, he knew exactly what she needed to hear most.

Fortunately, bartending was pretty straight forward, she thought, breating a sigh of relief. Happy hour customers, mostly local laborers, favored Yuengling draft beers with occasional shots of bourbon. But since a growing number of customers were fans of microbrew beers, the Creekside Tavern had expanded to include an impressive assortment of craft beers in bottles and on tap that drew appreciative tasters from

surrounding areas. There was also a variety of wines, including the Sherards' own house reds and whites. Family members had been making wine for decades and were permitted to sell a limited amount of their own products. The Tavern Red was especially good.

"Would you like anything else to munch on?" Carole Hannah asked, placing a pint glass of beer in front of Reverend Randall Shelby, pastor of the Holy Ghost Church of Love.

"I'll have the pigs in a blanket with mashed potatoes. On the side," he stressed, glancing up at her to make his point. "Since you're new, I'll tell you I don't like my foods touching each other on the plate." He continued studying the menu. "Will your sister be here tonight?"

"She'll get here in a little while," she answered, writing down his order. "Would you like a salad with that?"

"No salad. I don't like that fancy lettuce you insist on using."

"Romaine?"

His lips parted in a grimace and he shook his head vehemently.

She felt her throat tighten as his eyes moved from her face to her chest and remained there about five seconds too long. Reddening slightly, she quickly turned her back to him. The man gave her the creeps, and she wasn't the only one who thought that. She'd heard similar comments from female family members and friends.

"He's been divorced twice, even though he's a minister," Holly whispered to her in the kitchen. "His second wife took off for Virginia a few years ago. Mom said she tried to talk with her one time about all the bruises, and that poor girl said Randall didn't allow her to talk with anyone who didn't go to his church. Can you imagine what it must be like to be married to someone like him? It's sickening to think about having to be with him...you know, that way. Ugh."

"Well, let's not go to picture land on that one," Carole Hannah agreed, trying to lighten the mood. But a shudder raced up her neck.

Despite the rumors, Randall remained a fixture at the Holy Ghost Church of Love, where he led a small congregation of devout worshippers in praise to the Lord. No one knew that in Virginia, Randall's second ex-wife had taken out a restraining order against him.

At six o'clock, Sandy Sherard strolled into the bar for her evening shift. Two years younger than Carole Hannah, Sandy was an artist specializing in watercolor and pastel paintings. After finishing her fine

arts degree at the Pennsylvania College of Art and Design, she had lived for a while in New York City before moving back to Walkers Corner, when she realized she could live for much less and still charge the same prices for her work.

"Hey, there," Sandy said to her sister. "What did you and Mom cook up for the dinner specials tonight?"

"We've got my favorite Tuscan vegetable soup as one of the soups of the day. We also have broiled, fried, or Cajun haddock; wild rice pilaf; a side of steamed broccoli; or baby carrots braised with oranges, since clementines are out of season. We also have eggplant lasagna with a side of angel hair pasta and a house salad," Carole Hannah responded. "Oh, and we've got Althea's huckleberry pie with mango ice cream for the dessert special."

"That one will sell out fast," Sandy said as she fastened a white apron over her jeans and stashed an order pad in the pocket. "Did you come up with the carrot recipe?"

Carole Hannah nodded. "It's simple, but I think people will really like it."

"Business is sure gonna pick up when the locals find out you're cooking with Mom again," Sandy said.

A strikingly pretty brunette with a sprinkling of freckles, blue eyes, and a willowy figure, Sandy Sherard was considered by many to be among the town's "local characters." Unmarried by choice, her single status caused no end of consternation among the available men in Walkers Corner, most of whom remained stubbornly convinced that no woman could possibly be happy being unmarried unless, of course, she was gay.

Sandy could have had any man she wanted, but experience had proven to her that when she was in a relationship with any of the locals, her creative endeavors were sharply curtailed. Men from her hometown didn't seem to understand that art was her livelihood and that when the muse struck, she had little choice but to respond. As a young woman, she had learned the hard way that whenever she dated a new man, there immediately became an undercurrent of expectation that she would change her life to suit his wishes. At times, it seemed Sandy's interests and activities even posed a threat, and then the guy would begin to put her down or minimize her work.

It was just easier to remain free. After three decades as an accomplished artist, she had a national clientele that commissioned paintings for their homes and businesses. Her work was featured in several galleries, and she often traveled around the country to exhibit her newest paintings.

"Hard day?" Carole Hannah asked, peering intently at her sister. "You have green paint on your jaw."

"It's only a hard day if the light's not right," Sandy said, winking and dabbing at the paint with a terrycloth towel. "I can't believe how much I got done today. There were only a few of the older students with me, and they all work pretty independently, so it was a good day for me to concentrate on my own stuff." She wrinkled her nose. "How was your first day back in the kitchen with Mom?"

"Lots of fun, but I'm definitely feeling my age. I seem to remember this used to be easier when I was in high school and college. I don't know how Mom does it."

"I know what you mean, and Dad does just as much as she does. It'll be good for them to have you here all the time now. At their age, they deserve a break."

Sandy lived off route 119 in a hundred-year-old, white, two-story house that featured her own handmade stained glass windows. The house had an enclosed porch that she had remodeled years earlier into a studio with floor-to-ceiling windows. In this space, she happily painted and taught art classes for all ages. The truth was that Sandy didn't need to work part-time at the tavern. Having long ago been dismissed from the kitchen when her abysmal lack of cooking skills became obvious, she filled in part-time at the bar or waited tables out of family loyalty. She was light on her feet and quick with a joke, and her easygoing manner made her a favorite with customers.

Carole Hannah nodded her head in Randall Shelby's direction. "He's been asking for you."

"He wants to save me." Sandy groaned and rolled her eyes. "So far, it hasn't worked."

"Lucky for you."

When Sandy appeared behind the bar, several of the regulars greeted her enthusiastically. Randall, nursing his first pint, moved closer to the middle.



“Good afternoon, Sandy,” he said formally, adjusting his tie. “There’s a festival over at the Greek Orthodox Church this Saturday evening. I was wondering about your plans to attend.”

“Those ladies make a mean baklava,” Sandy responded noncommittally as she checked on one of the kegs.

“Perhaps you’d like to try some Greek food. I’d be honored to escort you.”

“Thanks, but I’ve got lots going on this weekend.”

“I’ve always wondered how you spend your time, Sandy. Do you get out much?”

“Don’t be concerned about my social life, Randy,” she responded with a dismissive wave as she continued serving customers.

“I get the impression you’d rather not share anything about your personal life with me,” he pressed on, oblivious to the amused glances of a few customers who were taking an interest in the conversation and jabbing each other with their elbows. “Is there any particular reason why you prefer not to tell me?”

“No offense intended,” Sandy said as she rang up a sale, “but my personal life is actually none of your business, Randy.”

Two burly construction workers seated next to Randall hooted loudly and high-fived each other. Randall’s eyes narrowed.

“Preacher, I guess she told you,” they laughed as Carole Hannah bit her lip to keep from smiling.

*Or maybe you just wish you had a man in your life,* Randall fumed silently, when Sandy turned to wait on another customer. He finished his beer in simmering silence.



## Carole Hannah's Cranberry-Oatmeal Bars

1/2 cup canola oil  
2/3 cup light brown sugar  
1/2 cup honey  
1 large egg  
1/2 cup chopped pecans or walnuts  
2 tsp. vanilla extract  
1/2 cup toasted wheat germ  
1/2 cup dried cranberries (or other diced, dried fruit)  
2 cups old-fashioned oatmeal  
1/2 tsp. sea salt

Preheat the oven to 325 degrees. Line a 13 X 9-inch metal baking pan with parchment paper, or lightly grease aluminum foil and place on a cookie sheet.

In a small bowl, stir together oil, honey, vanilla, and egg until mixed. In a large bowl (using a fork), mix together oats, flour, brown sugar, nuts, wheat germ, dried fruit, and salt until combined. With a rubber spatula, stir the honey mixture into the oat mixture until blended. Scrape into the prepared pan. Wet your hands to keep them from sticking, and pat this mixture evenly around the pan.

Bake 25 to 35 minutes or until bars are a pale golden brown. Watch carefully to ensure they don't overbrown or the bars will be crunchy. Cool completely on wire rack about 1 hour and slice. Keep covered and refrigerate.

## Chapter 5

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**B**Y THE END OF HER FIRST day on the new job, Carole Hannah was exhausted, longing for a leisurely soak in the tub with a glass of wine and a little smooth jazz. No doubt, her children would appreciate hearing from her, too.

Just after seven o'clock, as she walked through the bar on her way out, she heard a familiar, boisterous laugh. Her heart skipped several beats when she saw Tony Whittaker, president of Whittaker Construction Company, the builder responsible for most of the homes in Walkers Corner, including her own. She felt her heart swell at the sight of her first love.

Tony's hair, once a glossy dark brown, was salt-and-pepper grey now, but still thick enough that other men tended to hide their comb-overs and bald spots under ball caps whenever he was around. With a wide smile and a quick, infectious laugh, Tony's sense of humor and practical jokes were legendary. Wherever there was a loud burst of laughter, Tony was usually in the thick of it.

In high school, he'd been quite a catch as evidenced by the number of cheerleaders who bragged to one another about any amount of attention he paid to them. Oblivious to these more popular girls, he zeroed in on cool, petite Carole Hannah, a studious flag twirler in the band, whose locker was next to his during sophomore year. She was friendly but shy, and she seemed completely unimpressed with him—that is, until she was put in charge of a school fundraiser for the local food bank. Tony, who volunteered solely for the purpose of getting to know her better,

went out of his way to gather more canned goods and raise more money than any other student. When he brought a \$250 check from Whittaker Construction Company, he achieved hero status.

Carole Hannah had been flattered all along by his frequent attention and flirtatious manner, but felt nervous about going out with someone like Tony, who had a reputation as a heartbreaker. But now, with his food bank triumph, she saw him in an entirely new light.

They remained a steady couple, even after she went off to Penn State and he enrolled in a vocational school to learn the skills needed for his role in the family business. They were on track to marry after Carole Hannah's graduation; that is, until the relationship fizzled her junior year. Soon afterward, she met Tim Lawson—the man who would become her husband and the father of her daughters—at a fraternity party. By the time she graduated from college, she'd heard that Tony had married a local girl rather unexpectedly and the couple was expecting their first child. Now he was divorced from his wife and engaged to a beloved elementary school teacher named Carla.

His brown eyes crinkled with pleasure. "Ceel!" he exclaimed, lifting her up and swinging her around. "You look even better than you did in high school." He kissed her soundly on the mouth, a move that resulted in cheers from the bar crowd.

Carole Hannah's fair complexion flushed beet red. She knew all eyes, including her father's, were on her. "I bet you say that to all the girls from school; that is, those who are still left around here."

Then, for the benefit of those who watched and listened with more than casual interest, she made it a point to say, "What's wrong with you, kissing me like that? You're an engaged man!"

The other bar customers exploded with raucous laughter. Tony shrugged and ordered a Sam Adams. "Just being friendly," he said. Grinning like a happy six-year-old, he took a gulp before saying, "It'll be great having you around here again. We need to catch up one of these days."

Carole Hannah felt her heart do familiar flip-flops. "Sure thing," she said, making an effort to sound casual. "Well, I guess I'll be seeing you around." Still blushing, she made a beeline for her car.

As she drove home, she fought to keep waves of excitement from sweeping over her and drowning out the voice of her common sense.

"Stop it," she told herself. "You're acting like a teenager. He's engaged to another woman, and it's been far too many years just to pick up where you left off."

Tony had been engaged to Carla Morgan for three years, but was clearly dragging his feet to the altar. Carole Hannah already knew that his reluctance to marry again stemmed, in large part, from fear of another failed marriage. His first wife, Nora, had broken his heart by sleeping with one of his subcontractors. Now Tony was protecting his heart just as Carole Hannah was protecting hers. Maybe, she thought, after all this time, they could simply be good friends and forget all the complications of love.

Even so, she recognized from the unsettled way her stomach felt that whatever history she shared with Tony was likely to be repeated, if they weren't careful. She didn't see any harm in being attracted to Tony, but she wasn't about to do anything to wreck his relationship with Carla.

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The next morning, Carole Hannah sat cross-legged on her favorite chair and placed her hands palms-up on her thighs. She closed her eyes and began the rhythmic breathing that carried her deep within. She fell easily into the meditative state and after ten minutes felt ready to begin focusing on her desires. With life just as serene as she had envisioned it could be, she continued her grateful prayers. She thought about the cookbook and pictured herself signing copies. Then she began her "Ah" meditation and followed it with affirmations.

*I'm happy and productive in my work life. My cookbook is in the process of becoming a bestseller.*

After a quick shower, she decided to take Florabelle for a walk on the trail beside Doe Run. Along the way, they planned to visit Granny Nell. As they made their way along the deserted trail, a cool, dense mist hovered over the creek. Here and there, she heard flutters in the trees and had to hold tight to Florabelle's leash to keep her from taking off after birds or squirrels. The air felt clammy on her skin, and she breathed in the pungent aroma of musky, ripe vegetation and the fishy smell of the water.

Granny Nell Sherard's yellow two-story bungalow was located close to the deepest, most swift flowing section of the creek. During heavy

rains, family members fretted about the dangers of flooding, but Gran stubbornly refused to leave her house.

"When I die, I want you to float me down the river in that house, like one of those Indian water burials," she joked. "If a flood carries me away in the house, it'll save you the time and trouble."

Although she still drove her old Buick Electra into town occasionally, Gran rarely left home these days except to attend church, pick up a few necessities, or deliver remedies. She was happiest tending her wildflowers, vegetables, and assorted berries that grew in profusion along the front, sides, and back of the house. Flowers and herbs used for cooking and medicinal purposes grew lush in a large greenhouse attached to the kitchen.

"No jumping in the creek," Carole Hannah warned as she released Florabelle from her leash. As the dog bolted in front of her, she made her way to the back of the house, where Nell was already hard at work in the greenhouse.

"Why, good morning, dear ones," Gran said, plucking oregano from a large planter and wrapping the sprigs in a damp towel. "And how is Miss Florabelle?"

In response, Florabelle sat down and raised her front paws in greeting, bringing a soft chuckle from Gran.

"Hello, Gran," Carole Hannah said, kissing her grandmother's soft rose-scented cheek.

"You're up awfully early," Gran noted, hopping like a sparrow from workbench to table.

"We thought we'd get in a walk before I go to work," Carole Hannah replied. "What are you mixing up this morning?"

"Oh, just a few remedies I thought might help some folks. I picked some of my best oregano for that nice girl at the Dollar General. She's been suffering from terrible cramps, poor thing. Oregano can be such a help, you know."

"I remember," Carole Hannah said. "You always gave that to me."

"So I did. Were you aware that your Grandpa Joe planted the first oregano for me after we were married? It was such a hearty strain; I've been able to keep her daughters growing all these years."

"I didn't know that, Gran." Carole Hannah sniffed the oregano



appreciatively. "I've always wondered, did Grandpa Joe know about your...um...special abilities, when he married you?"

Gran's tinkly laugh rang out. "Good heavens, no. He married me because he couldn't keep his hands off me. His mother swore I conjured up something to make him fall in love with me."

"Did you?" Carole Hannah's eyes opened wide. This was a side of her grandmother she had no trouble imagining.

"Honey, your grandpa said he knew I was the only one for him after he tasted my scones and tea cookies. He never had anything like them when he was growing up. His momma wasn't much of a baker, you know. Those scones and cookies, along with the tea I served him while we courted, made him fall in love with me. By then, I already knew he was the only man for me."

"And you never fell in love again after he died. He was your only true love," Carole Hannah said with a sigh. "That's so romantic."

"Romantic, my eye," Gran said, raising her eyebrows. "Men are a strange breed of cat, Carole Hannah. Some have to roam; they can never be house cats. I chose one I knew was capable of accepting me as I am and who came home every night. Romance is wonderful, but in the end, a happy marriage is about understanding what makes the other person unique and still loving them for those differences, in spite of yourself." She shook her head emphatically. "No, I prefer to live alone until I see Joe again and we can take up where we left off."

Carole Hannah smiled at her grandmother while Gran continued working. In old photos of her grandparents, Nell had been a beauty with long auburn hair that waved about her shoulders. At ninety-three, she was still lovely with long silver hair that she arranged in an upswept style and fastened with a gemstone clip. The elegant, simple style suited her. Tendrils of soft curls fell loosely about her high cheekbones, framing her heart-shaped face with its enormous cobalt-blue eyes and expressive mouth. Granny Nell's face had very few wrinkles or laugh lines--the result, she claimed, of the special creams and lotions she was more than happy to sell to local women. And sell, they certainly did.

"Let me help," Carole Hannah offered, picking up a small bottle with an eyedropper and handing it to Gran. "What's in that big brown bottle?"

"Just a little St. John's wort for folks that have the blues," Gran said.

She measured a tincture of St. John's wort with the eye dropper into a smaller bottle and added a measure of peppermint schnapps. "The herb tastes better with the schnapps." She winked. "Of course, it's important that people only take about a quarter teaspoon at a time."

As Gran jotted down instructions for her customers on note cards, Carole Hannah roamed around the greenhouse, sniffing and admiring the variety of plants displayed in deep planters and pots. The air smelled deliciously of flowers, ripe vegetation, and pungent herbs. Even at eight o'clock in the morning, the room was nearly eighty-five degrees and quite humid. Suddenly, she felt a fast rush of heat intensify, spreading from her back through her upper torso. Sweat broke out on her upper lip, and she felt her face, neck, and chest redden and grow fiery. Her first instinct was to run out of the greenhouse and hurl herself face-first into the creek. The feeling subsided after a moment, though, and she was grateful for the perspiration that gradually cooled her body.

"Gran, I've got to go; it's too warm in here for me," she said, continuing to fan her face and neck.

Nell glanced over. "This, too, shall pass," she said.

There were townspeople who believed that Nell Sherard was a witch. Yet there she was every Sunday morning in the front pew of the Doe Run Presbyterian Church, just as she'd been every Sunday since she came to Walkers Corner as a bride of eighteen.

She patiently explained to her detractors that she believed it was God's will that special features of every living plant be used. "Each plant waits in anticipation to be discovered and appreciated for its healing properties," she often said. Indeed, it was a tribute to each plant that it be used in service, she insisted, as she cultivated, harvested, and dried the plants for medicinal purposes. Most of the time, however, Nell ignored gossips and naysayers.

Her wise manner and gentle hands brought people from miles around for health advice or natural cures. Even the local general practitioner had no problem when patients sought Nell Sherard's advice before coming to see him. She was also a trained midwife who had delivered scores of babies in two counties, assisting three generations of doctors in difficult cases.

It was Granny Nell who first told Carole Hannah about the special gift shared by so many members of the Sherard family.

"It's the Scottish Sight, and a lot of our people have it," she told her granddaughter, looking deeply into her eyes. "It's a special gift that lets us know how to help others."

"Why do some people think what you do is against God?" Carole Hannah asked after hearing a few women speak behind their hands when Nell entered church one Sunday morning.

"It's just that they don't understand and don't care to learn," Gran answered matter-of-factly. "Don't ever let anyone tell you that the Sight is wrong, even if they can't see or hear or know what you know. We use our gifts in service and with pure intent. Your daddy has the Sight, honey, and you do, too."

She taught Carole Hannah how to sit quietly and focus on a happy thought, creating a mental scene that often transpired just as Carol Hannah envisioned it. Granny Nell was delighted with her quick progress and embarked on a series of rather untraditional lessons for her granddaughter.

Carole Hannah loved spending her after-school hours with Granny Nell, learning how to make herb tinctures as remedies for everything from heartburn to shingles. Finally, Gil had to intervene and insist that she participate in school activities at least three afternoons a week. So Carole Hannah joined the flag twirlers and the chorus, where she learned that her lilting soprano voice also had remarkably creative qualities when she sang while thinking extra hard about something she wanted.

"Please, Mother," Connie pleaded with Nell one afternoon after Carole Hannah skipped into the tavern kitchen, reporting that she had learned how to do magic. "I know what you do is wonderful because you're a good person, but we have to *live* in this town. Gil and I have a business to run, and gossip about magic could hurt us. It could also cause trouble for Carole Hannah at school."

"Nonsense," Nell said, waving her hand dismissively. "What I taught her is household magic. Anyway, we ought not to care about the good or bad opinions of others."

"Well, we do care."

Gran sniffed. "There isn't a soul in town who hasn't asked for my help or advice over the years. The only one who grumbles all the time is that mean ol' Ida Watson, and she's just mad 'cause my pie placed

higher 'n hers at the county fair thirty years ago. She said I put a spell on her coconut cream."

Connie raised one eyebrow, unable to suppress a smile. "I can't imagine why she'd think that."

When Carole Hannah asked about the meaning of *Wiccan*, a word she had overheard the mother of one of her friends use in reference to Gran, Connie took her daughter aside for a serious talk.

"Not everyone understands what it's like to live in a family that has such unusual abilities," she explained.

"Does that mean Gran is a witch?" Carole Hannah asked.

"No, it doesn't, but there are some folks who think so. It doesn't matter what they think, as long as they keep their thoughts to themselves," Connie answered firmly. "A lot of people don't understand Gran, but still feel it's their right to judge her."

"But Gran helps so many people; it's just not fair. I guess Daddy and I will have to use our Sight to protect her," Carole Hannah said, outraged that anyone could think of her gentle grandmother as anything but good.

"You'll do no such thing. Now go finish your homework." The thin line of Connie's lips told Carole Hannah the discussion was over.

That night, Connie lay awake for hours, unable to quell her worried thoughts until Gil finally crawled in beside her after closing the bar at two o'clock.

"Penny for your thoughts," he said as he slid between the covers.

"Better make it a dime," she said, but didn't chuckle as she normally did when they had this exchange. "Gil, I'm worried. I can't accept that Carole Hannah has the Sight; I just can't. I know there are things about you that I don't quite understand, but I try not to think about it too much. It's always been a part of who you are. Now I watch Carole Hannah, and I see it happening with her, too."

"And is it so terrible?" Gil asked mildly, turning to face Connie and drawing her close. He smoothed the hair away from her forehead.

"Reuben wants nothing to do with it, you know," Connie whispered sharply, trying not to succumb as she always did to Gil's touch. "He thinks the Sight is a black mark on his soul. We need to respect that, especially now that he's going into seminary."

"Reuben still doesn't understand that faith and the Sight are both



ways of knowing,” Gil said as he stroked her cheek gently. “When Reub gets to be a minister, he can help others learn about God and lead them in practice so they want to know more. The rituals of the church help people understand and open themselves up to something even more personal. I believe it’ll be a while yet before Reub knows himself well enough to use his special gifts. In the meantime, we will not deny our own abilities.”

He wrapped his arms around his wife. “Don’t you understand, honey, that it’s the highest form of good that allows us to have the Sight? There’s nothing to fear; I promise.”

Connie’s heart turned over in love and trust as she returned his kiss.

And then it was time for Carole Hannah to leave Walkers Corner for Penn State, where she enrolled at the main campus in State College. She fully intended to finish her degree and return home to teach English at the local high school, but fate had other plans for her. She met Tim Lawson, who had bucked with family tradition and chosen to play basketball at Penn State, rather than following his father and grandfather’s legacies at Kansas State University. They married a year after graduation, and she moved with him back to Kansas, where Whitney and Riley were born. Even after the marriage ended many years later, she knew it was important for the girls to remain close to their father. Dutifully, she resigned herself to staying in Kansas until their daughters were grown. Little did she know when she left Walkers Corner that she’d be away for so long.



## Carrots Clementine

- 1 pound crinkle cut or fingerling carrots
- 2 clementines, pith removed, finely diced (substitute oranges when clementines are out of season)
- 1 tsp. clementine rind
- 3 tsp. freshly grated ginger
- 3 tbsp. minced onion
- 1 tbsp. butter
- 1 tbsp. extra virgin olive oil

Steam carrots until crisp tender, and then drain. Meanwhile, melt butter with olive oil over medium-high heat. Add onion, stirring until softened, about 2 to 3 minutes. Drain carrots and place in a serving dish.

Stir ginger into butter, olive oil, and onion mixture. Add clementines and grated clementine rind, tossing to combine. Spoon clementine mixture over carrots, and stir to coat well.

## Chapter 6

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CONNIE KOMINSKY-SHERARD WAS A QUIET, STUDIOUS woman with a sharp intellect and an even stronger work ethic. A devoted wife and reliable business partner, she was also a loving mother, doting grandmother, and constant friend.

During four years at Johnstown Central High School, she was an exceptional student, highly regarded by teachers. Petite and exceptionally pretty, with a penchant for twinset sweaters and full skirts that she paired with classic ballet flats, Connie had a more generous clothing budget than most girls, thanks to a booming babysitting business. It was no surprise to anyone when the senior class voted her “most likely to succeed.”

Yet despite promising academic credentials, Connie understood that her dreams of college were unlikely to materialize if she didn't make them happen herself, since no one in the Kominsky family had ever attended college. Her parents were hard-working, first generation Americans who believed higher education was for “other people” and tried to dissuade her from her goal.

Like so many other young women her age, Connie lived at home, sharing a room with her younger sister and dutifully contributing to the family's income while obediently saving items for her hope chest. After graduating from high school with highest honors, she took an office job at a plumbing and heating supply company on the bus line and stubbornly insisted on attending evening classes at the University of Pittsburgh's neighborhood campus.

"Your sisters, they find nice husbands. How will you meet a man if all you do is work and study?" her Hungarian mother fretted in her broken English. "You need to go to church more!"

During Connie's third semester, Gilbert Sherard from Walkers Corner entered the picture, plunking down in the desk next to hers in history class. Gil, with his handsome freckled face and wavy chestnut hair, became a complete pest by borrowing her favorite fountain pen, forgetting to return it, and then promptly losing it.

"I guess I need to make it up to you." He grinned without a hint of shame. "May I take you out to the Dairy Dell for ice cream or a chocolate soda after class?"

Connie, whose entrepreneurial endeavors hadn't allowed her much time to date in high school, hesitated for a minute, but then shyly accepted his invitation. Her parents were thrilled to meet Gil later that week when he took Connie to the movies, and even prouder to see his byline featured regularly in the town's newspaper.

Even with her limited experience with boys, Connie recognized that Gil was an unusual young man, possessing a gentle wit and introspective nature. He had a disarming tendency to complete her thoughts. Rather than annoying her, it allowed her to feel cherished and well-understood. Gil courted Connie that entire year, inviting her to the drive-in movies or out for fries and a Coke. He was imaginative on his limited budget, often finding free concerts and ethnic art exhibits he thought she'd enjoy. When Gil took her home to meet his mother and father at Christmas time that year, she was treated to Nell's special tea cookies and invited to come back soon.

One Saturday afternoon in June, Gil and Connie brought a blanket and picnic basket to the lawn in front of the Roxbury Bandshell in Johnstown, where a six-piece band was playing sentimental favorites. Without a word, Gil presented her with a velvet box containing a tiny, glistening diamond on a gold band.

"Oh!" Connie exclaimed, waving her hands in front of her face in a futile attempt to keep from crying. She jumped to her feet as Gil rose to his. He took her in his arms and kissed her; then held up Connie's left hand as the concertgoers around them clapped and cheered. The next song the band played was *Love and Marriage*.

They married later that year in a simple ceremony in Winchester,

Virginia, as so many of their friends had done, and moved into one side of a shabby frame double-house near campus. It didn't take long before Connie was pregnant with Reuben. She was thrilled, even though it brought an end to full-time employment and college classes. This was as it was supposed to be, she thought, and immersed herself in becoming the best wife and mother possible. With her talent for creating simple, delicious meals, and by being extra careful with Gil's paychecks, they eventually were able to save enough for a small down payment on a house. Their new home cost \$11,000, and their mortgage left them constantly strapped for cash.

Connie loved Gil with all her heart. He wasn't just her husband; he was also her best friend. He never raised his voice or lost patience, never took her for granted, and regularly brought bouquets of freshly-picked flowers at unexpected times. Over the next several years, Gil worked days at the newspaper and finished his night classes in journalism. Connie, who by then had started a home typing service to supplement their income, never returned to college. Yet she always had a stack of library books on the coffee table and read as much as marriage and motherhood allowed, often staying up late into the night.

After Sandy arrived, however, it became more difficult to live on Gil's newspaper wages.

"We need to start our own business," he said for what Connie thought was the hundredth time. "If we move back to Walkers Corner, we can find cheaper homes with more property, too."

As fate would have it, Gil's grandfather died later that year, leaving an established but rather rundown bar and grill in Walkers Corner to Gil and his cousin. Gil and Connie jumped at the chance to be part owners of the Creekside Tavern, and moved their brood into the second and third floors of the house.

Eventually, they bought out Gil's cousin's share of the business which, by that time, was growing by leaps and bounds. Connie took over the cooking responsibilities, bringing with her all of her family's delicious recipes. Gil, ever the charming storyteller and attentive listener, built up a solid bar clientele. Within ten years, they expanded the business to include three guest rooms on the second floor, and bought a separate house down the road for their growing family.

But now, Connie had to admit she was tired of the constant strain

of cooking and managing the business, which now also included guest services and housekeeping for the inn. They had wonderful, loyal employees and family members willing to help out, but she and Gil still worked as hard as they had in their twenties, and they hadn't been anywhere alone together in decades. She longed for an easier life so that she could read, garden, maybe even travel.

"We can go anywhere you want, anytime you want," Gil assured her. "Just say the word."

"I can't relax on vacation without a family member in charge," she insisted. "One week of food that doesn't meet people's expectations, and we could lose everything we've worked so hard for."

It would have been ideal if Reuben had taken an interest in the business, but he was a busy minister with a large congregation. She was incredibly proud of her son when he stood at the altar and delivered his weekly sermon. Althea, his wife, was a wonderful daughter-in-law and helped out whenever she could, but it wasn't fair to expect her to do anything more than housework and childcare for their grandson, in addition to being the pastor's wife. Sandy was a lousy cook, but at least she was always willing to help out by waitressing and bartending.

So, as the years went by, Connie counted her blessings, taking pride in everything she and Gil had accomplished. But now, she dared to hope for some balance in her own life. With Carole Hannah home again and seemingly so happy in her new role, she would be a natural to take over the business someday. Gil agreed.

Connie couldn't help wondering, though, if Tony Whittaker would sweep their daughter off her feet again. She liked Tony, but thought he was all wrong for Carole Hannah. Tony's fiancée, Carla, was a sweet girl, but they had been engaged for three years and Tony still showed no signs of walking her down the aisle—and that was straight from the lips of his mother.

With Gil's favorite chicken dish ready to pop into the oven, Connie settled into their overstuffed sofa, a glass of iced tea in hand. "Que sera, sera. Whatever will be, will be," she sang to herself as she opened to the first page of a new novel she'd been longing to read.

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*To: WhitneyL; RileyL; BoT*

*From: CookOnTheGo*

*Subject: Wow!*

*I'm so proud to hear all the great news!*

*Riley, it's wonderful that you've gotten an internship at the children's hospital. You'll be a great hearing and speech pathologist. You've always been so good with little kids. The idea of graduate school may seem overwhelming, but I know you can do it.*

*Whitney, congratulations on getting the production job for that new sports show. Even if it means you have to work two jobs for a little while, you're already on your way to achieving your dreams. I'm so proud to have a television producer for a daughter!*

*Bo, it's fantastic that you were hired by SkyBlue. I've flown those jets a few times in the past, and the airline seems to really understand customer service. Maybe you'll be my pilot someday!*

*We all need to celebrate when we see each other again. Let me know when your weekend schedules are clear so we can arrange a reunion in Chicago.*

*Love, Mom*

## **Gil's Favorite Chicken**

1 14.5 oz. can diced tomatoes in juice  
6 oz. whole-grain seasoned croutons  
1/2 cup water  
1/2 tsp. dried rosemary  
1/2 tsp. dried oregano  
2 tsp. dried basil  
2 tsp. minced garlic  
2 lb. boneless, skinless chicken breasts cut into bite-size pieces  
1 cup part-skim mozzarella cheese  
1/4 cup Parmesan

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Place canned tomatoes and water in a medium bowl. Add garlic, rosemary, oregano and 1/2 tsp. basil. Add croutons and stir until croutons are moistened. Set aside.

Arrange chicken along bottom of a square baking dish and sprinkle with remaining basil and cheeses. Top with stuffing mixture. Bake 35 to 40 minutes.

## Chapter 7

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**U**NDER A CLOUDLESS, STEEL-GREY SKY, PATCHES of mist hovered over Doe Run. With the water level in the creek lower than usual due to the heat and a lack of rain, the current had a noticeably higher pitch as it splashed around submerged rocks, boulders, and tree limbs, creating eddies along its way.

Clutching her travel mug in one hand and a dry bag with her cell phone and keys over one shoulder, Carole Hannah dragged a six-foot orange kayak and paddle to the rushing water. The Creekside Tavern and Inn offered an assortment of kayaks, canoes, and bicycles for use by guests and friends. It had been over a year since she'd paddled a kayak, so she moved extra cautiously, remembering to strap on a lifejacket and protective helmet.

She flinched as her feet, clad in old sneakers to protect them from sharp rocks and sticks, touched the cold, mountain-fed water and predictably numbed. Her shoes stirred up mud and a web of detritus as she pulled the kayak farther into the water. Tipping slightly, she stepped inside as the kayak continued to wobble. For a moment she felt anxious, but then grabbed the paddle and used it to gently push herself away from the shore as she paddled in and out like breath.

Her heart thumped with pleasure, then slowed as she felt the breeze caress her cheeks, heard the whoosh of wind in the trees. It was moments like these that the soul knew paradise, she thought. Cold droplets of water landed on her forehead as she dipped her paddles in and out of the creek, and she couldn't help thinking of the infant baptisms of

Whitney and Riley. As it always had, the beloved creek affected her on a deeply spiritual level, reminding her of the most important truth she had learned in life: going with the flow, trusting, and accepting the twists and turns as they appeared was more enjoyable than fearfully fighting the current. No one could be absolutely certain where the creek was going or where it would end, but joy came in embracing the experience.

The creek had undergone its own rebirth in recent years. As children growing up in the 1960s, Reuben, Carole Hannah, and Sandy were warned time and again not to play in Doe Run because of pollution from acid mine drainage that turned the water a sulfur-smelling, rusty-orange. Connie watched her children like a mother hawk, forbidding them to touch or wade in the water. Gil, who had grown up living beside the creek, took it all in stride.

"A mouthful of that water, and they'll learn," was all he ever said.

Following several years of remediation by government and volunteer citizen groups, a treatment system now filtered the creek water. Beds of wetlands, including cattails that thrived on the acidic environment, neutralized the acid. These days, Doe Run was clean and clear, scientifically assured to be safe enough for water sports and even swimming. Along the shoreline, a few intrepid, early morning fishermen cast their lines for perch, bass, and trout.

After a while, the morning mist began to lift and the sky gradually turned a brilliant cerulean-blue. Wispy white clouds drifted overhead as the sun continued its gradual ascent. Carole Hannah paddled her kayak downstream, stopping here and there to rest her arms and drift on the current. She stopped for a moment beside a rock, anchored herself with the paddle, and squinted in the now intense sunshine.

Water ripples glinted like crystals off the water as waves lapped rhythmically against the kayak, gently rocking her. Trees on either side of the creek, still dressed in their summer best, wore every conceivable shade of green and gold, leaves flipping in the strong breeze to display the sage hue of their undersides. In the shadows, the leaves appeared almost violet. Here and there, a sudden splash alerted Carole Hannah to the presence of fish—a sure sign of a healthy ecosystem. Along the shoreline, a great blue heron high-stepped on long, stick-like legs as it stalked small fish for breakfast. With a soft splash, the heron dipped

his head and came up with what appeared to be a rather large frog, yet another treat.

Sighing with contentment, she took a sip of coffee from her travel mug. "Is there anything better than time spent on the water?" she asked no one in particular.

As she saw Granny Nell's cottage come into view on the right, she paddled over to shore and stepped out of the kayak. Dragging it up the bank and across the trail into Nell's yard, she turned it upside down on the grass to dry, intending to come back later to pick it up.

With a quick wave to her grandmother, who was serving fresh sugar water to the hummingbirds that never strayed too far from her property, Carole Hannah made her way along the trail. She hadn't gone very far when she heard the sharp crack of sticks and a rustle of nearby bushes. Jumping back in alarm, she watched as a tall, bearded man in a wetsuit stepped out of the undergrowth along shore. He held a water testing kit in one hand and a notebook in the other. He looked distracted at first, then mildly irritated to see her, and finally curious.

"Hello," Carole Hannah said as she stood still on the trail, her heart beating fast.

"Oh, hi," the man replied after a moment. "Sorry if I startled you."

She shrugged. "I wasn't expecting anyone to be in the water this early in the morning. I thought you might be a deer."

"I just saw three of them downstream," the man said helpfully, stuffing his notebook under his arm as he extended a hand to shake hers. "I'm Mark Baker. This is a good time to check the pH of a few areas along the creek. I want some of my students to come down here this afternoon and do some water testing."

"I'm Carole Hannah Sherard. You must be a biology professor at the university," she ventured.

"Nice to meet you," Mark said. "Yes, I teach biology. This cleanup project is coming along so nicely; it gives me hope that we can reverse the damage completely someday."

Mark's eyes were bottle-green, his hair mostly grey and a little longer than that of most men she knew, but definitely stylish, not shaggy. His moustache and beard, which were short and neatly trimmed, were



just a shade darker than his hair. He was a very handsome man, she decided.

They walked together down the trail as he provided her with an overview of the water cleanup project. Now that he knew she was a *boomerang*, the name locals called people who moved away and later returned to Walkers Corner, he explained that there was considerable interest from other communities looking to solve their own acid mine drainage problems.

"Acid mine drainage--we call it AMD, for short--is an undesirable result of coal mining."

Carole Hannah already knew the cause and the unfortunate result of acid mine drainage, but decided to remain politely silent as Mark talked about the extent of the problem.

"Acidic water seeps out of abandoned coal mines and literally covers the entire stream bed with rusty sediment," he explained. "Ultimately, it destroys the entire watershed, which causes plants and animals to die off. If people don't care about the plants and animals, they ought to care that the water is also unfit for any kind of public use."

"I'll never forget how my grandmother grieved over the orange water," Carole Hannah said. "She still lives nearby."

"Your grandmother must be Nell Sherard."

"One and the same," she answered. "Gran works hard to convince people they need to care about Doe Run. I think she has creek water running through her veins."

"She's a legend in these parts." Mark nodded his head in agreement. "She must also be a walking botany textbook. I've never seen as many species of plants as I've noticed in her yard. I bet she knows way more about those plants than I do."

*What a generous thing to say,* Carole Hannah thought, beginning to like him.

"She's a legend for many other reasons, too," Carole Hannah said with a wry grin and saw the first sign of a smile twitching at the corners of Mark's mouth. It vanished quickly, and his expression grew serious again.

As they reached the main road, where Mark's Outback was parked, he asked, "Can I give you a lift anywhere?"

"Actually, if you could drop me upstream at the tavern, I'd appreciate it."

His expression changed.

"I'm not going there to get an early start on cocktails. I work there," Carole Hannah explained quickly.

"Oh, right; your parents own the tavern. What do you do there? I've never seen you before."

"I'm the new cook—one of the assistant cooks to my mother, actually. But I'm also working on a cookbook of lighter, healthier recipes I intend to create for the tavern."

Mark gave her a look of such doubt and suspicion, she laughed.

"Don't shock people's systems too much," he said, mustering a wry smile. "Although, I must say there's nothing like a steady diet of kielbasa and sauerkraut with mashed potatoes to round out a person's diet, not to mention their physique."

"Nothing too weird, I promise," she said.

"By the way, I happen to like kielbasa and sauerkraut with mashed potatoes, especially what I've had at the tavern. But I'll look forward to tasting some of your healthier creations."

"You won't even notice the tofu," she said with a straight face.

He gave her a sidelong glance.

"I'm kidding!"

"Have you always cooked professionally?"

"Actually, this is my first full-time cooking job. Before that, I was a fundraiser for a university in Kansas." Carole Hannah briefly filled Mark in on her former career.

"Aren't you interested in working for the university here?" Mark asked. "I'm sure we could use someone with your skills and experience."

She shook her head emphatically. "I did fundraising for twenty-five years. It's time to do something different now."

Mark came to a stop near the side entrance to the tavern. Carole Hannah noticed her mother peer curiously out the kitchen door and then quickly duck out of sight.

"Maybe you could be a volunteer consultant for the Doe Run Canoe Club. We need to raise money to keep this remediation project going," Mark suggested as she opened the passenger door. "There's another phase of cleanup that needs to happen downstream."

"Sure, we can talk about that sometime. Hey, thanks for the ride," she said, stepping out of the vehicle.

"No problem. It was nice to meet you. Maybe I'll run into you again," Mark said.

Connie Sherard raised one eyebrow when Carole Hannah greeted her with a peck on the cheek.

"Hi, Mom; I'm just here to pick up my car and get the kayak."

"I see you've met Dr. Baker," Connie said mildly. "His wife, Kathleen, died about a year ago from a massive heart attack. Didn't know what hit her, it happened so fast." She paused. "I hear he's had a rough time of it."

"He seems so serious; it's tough to get a smile out of him."

"Losing Kathleen like that was a huge shock. She was a wonderful woman," Connie said. She turned on her heel and glanced backward. "He's such a nice, down-to-earth man. Maybe one of these days, he'll meet someone who can make him smile again."

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When she got home, Carole Hannah put her phone on do-not-disturb, sat down in her favorite chair, and closed her eyes. She spritzed lavender water into the air around her, lit a white candle, and rested her hands palms-up on her lap. Then she let go of outward distractions and took several cleansing breaths. As she exhaled the stresses of the week, she began to feel peaceful and calm. The deep, rhythmic breathing helped her descend into the bliss of meditation. After a few minutes, as her mind quieted, she had a sudden inspiration and felt ready to envision a desire for something she hadn't dared to think about for a while—lasting, soul mate love.

She knew better than to focus on one specific individual, since that person might not be in her best interests. Lord knew Tony might be the worst person for her. It was best to have faith that the ideal person would manifest in her life without effort. Instead, she thought about the qualities she wanted in a life partner. Quietly, she began to list them to herself.

*"I'm attracting a man who appreciates who I am, not who he wants me to be. He's a man who shares my interests and values. We share a strong spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical relationship. He has a kind*

*nature and good sense of humor. He's honest and trustworthy. He has an open, curious mind and does work that is important to him. He's a man who values family and friends. I'm attracting a man who is truly ready to move forward in a lasting relationship.*

She continued thinking of qualities that were most important to her and then began to sing the sound of creation, "Ah." When she repeated the sound three times, she released her desire and detached from the outcome. Now, as she opened her eyes, she noticed that the message light on her phone was blinking.

When she played back the message, she heard Tony's voice. "Hey, Cee, just wondered if you'd like to get together for a beer so we can catch up. Call me on my cell."

*That was fast.* She shook her head in amusement, thinking of all the times her manifestations produced immediate results. For a second, she envisioned herself back in his arms again and shook off the thought. *Best to let this one play itself out,* she decided, and realized with a smile that Tony might not be the only possibility.

## Granny Nell's Tea-Time Scones

2 cups sifted all-purpose flour  
2 tbsp. sugar  
1 tbsp. baking powder  
1/2 tsp. salt  
1/3 cup butter  
1/3 cup golden raisins  
1 egg, lightly beaten  
3/4 cup milk (approximately)

Preheat oven to 425 degrees. Sift together flour, sugar, baking powder, and salt. Cut in butter with a pastry blender until particles are the size of peas. Mix in raisins. Add the egg and about 3/4 of the milk. Stir quickly until no flour is visible. Add more milk if necessary to make soft dough.

Turn dough out on a floured surface and knead lightly about 15 times. Cut dough in half and shape each half into a ball. Press or roll into two rounds about 1/2-inch thick, and then cut each round into 8 wedges, like a pie. Bake on lightly greased cookie sheets without allowing sides to touch. If desired, lightly brush tops with 1 egg yolk beaten with 1 tablespoon milk for a golden glaze.

Bake 12 minutes or until golden brown. This recipe makes 16 scones. Serve with butter and jam.



## Chapter 8

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WHEN SHE ARRIVED AT THE TAVERN later that morning, Carole Hannah jotted down her most recent inspiration for a healthier cabbage slaw recipe and began assembling all the ingredients. Every sandwich served at the tavern came with a side item such as creamy coleslaw, penne pasta salad, or a lemon-dressed red potato salad with fresh parsley.

As she shredded cabbage, grated carrots, and diced red, yellow, and green peppers, she thought about a rangy, slightly sweet dressing for her newest creation. After experimenting with a few ingredients and deciding on honey as the sweetener, she hit on a winning combination.

"I thought this would be a lighter alternative to coleslaw, for a change," she said as she held out a forkful for her mother to taste. "Don't you think it will go well with the pulled pork sandwich we're serving today?"

"Mm, you should definitely put this one in your cookbook. Keep this up and we might let you cook solo one of these days." Connie flicked her dish towel playfully across her daughter's backside and returned to wrapping seasoned ground beef into cabbage leaves for her famous pigs in a blanket.

That afternoon at three o'clock, it took everyone by surprise when Connie suddenly announced that she was taking a longer break at home.

"In fact," she announced, "I don't think I'll be back until tomorrow."

Holly, who had just entered the kitchen to pick up sandwich platters for table two, stopped dead in her tracks. "Are you okay, Grandma?" she asked, peering at her with concern.

"Just fine, dear," Connie answered breezily. "Carole Hannah has everything under control, and I've got other things to do at home. Don't forget the kettle-cooked potato chips with those sandwiches."

"Hell really has frozen over," Holly muttered under her breath as the screen door shut behind Connie.

Carole Hannah smiled, pleased that her mother already trusted her to manage the kitchen by herself. "Hey," she said to Holly, "after you deliver those sandwiches to table two, why don't you ask that cute boy, Jake, whether he wants cheddar or jack on his burger."

Holly rolled her eyes. "Can't you ask him?"

"No, that's your job. Now go."

"I don't have time for him, you know," Holly said seriously. "He only has one thing on his mind."

Carole Hannah burst out laughing. "Yes, I think that's probably true," she said. "But before you go there, I think he'd be happy if you said more than two words to him. Remember, we're all about customer service here. Start by asking what kind of cheese he wants on his burger and then you can decide whether or not to have an actual conversation."

Holly rolled her eyes.

"Jake is a sweet guy, Holly. The fact that he also happens to be sweet on you should make you feel good."

Holly's eyes clouded over. "This is how it all starts, you know, and then the real trouble happens."

"Not always, kitten," Carole Hannah said, her heart contracting in sympathy. "I truly believe you can find a handsome prince and live happily ever after. And besides," she continued, "Evan is growing up fast and could use a mature, fun guy to hang out with."

Holly looked thoughtful for a moment. "We'll see," she said doubtfully, before heading back to the dining room.

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At four thirty, Carole Hannah relieved Gil behind the bar for his dinner break. Chainsaw Boy was in his usual spot in the corner, nursing

a Yuengling and looking glum. Setting out a small bowl of buttered popcorn, she remarked, "You don't seem your usual cheery self today."

Jake glanced up morosely. He flipped a lock of sun-streaked brown hair out of his eyes and rested his arms on the bar. They were muscular and deeply tanned from hours spent working in the sun. "I don't understand why your niece hates me so much."

"Oh," Carole Hannah said, trying to resist the urge to smile and failing. She popped a few of the buttery, salty kernels in her mouth and chewed thoughtfully. "I don't think she hates you. I think she's just nervous around men. She also has her little boy, Evan, to think about, and he's been her entire world for six years. Anyone who wants to be with Holly has to understand that he gets Evan, too—sort of an extra bonus. Could you handle that?"

"Of course, I can," Jake said. "Evan is a cute kid." He raked his fingers through his hair in frustration. "I know all of that stuff about her, and I'm not like her ex. He's always been a real jerk."

"Well, I'm glad you understand. It's normal to be nervous when you meet someone nice, someone you don't know very much about," she said reassuringly. "This is just a suggestion, but maybe you could invite her to do something you think you'll both enjoy and let her know that Evan can come along. That way, she won't feel as much pressure being alone with you, and she'd know that you understand about Evan."

Jake brightened. "I could invite them to watch me work."

"That's a great idea," she replied. "In fact, I'd really like to watch you work sometime. I've never seen a chainsaw artist in action, but I did see the butterfly you made out of that dead tree in the Athertons' front yard. It's really beautiful, although I have no idea how you made the wings look so delicate using a chainsaw. I'd have sawed off the entire wing and taken my arm with it."

Jake smiled. "It's easy, once you get a little practice. Hey, thanks for the suggestion," he said as he slid off the bar stool and slapped a twenty on the counter. "Keep the change."

"Nope, this one's on me," Carole Hannah said, handing the money back to him. "And the advice is free, too."

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*To: WhitneyL; RileyL; BoT*

*From: CookOntheGo*

*Subject: Life in the Great Outdoors*

*Hi, guys! I'm sitting here on the back porch with Florabelle and the new squeaky toy she's in the process of disemboweling to remove the squeaker. Speaking of your dog, she did something so sweet last night. I was sitting by the fireplace when I noticed a couple of small, wriggling pink things under one of the chairs. At first, I was afraid they were baby mice, but I looked closer, and they were newborn baby bunnies. Then I brought Florabelle inside, and she was transporting another one on her tongue!*

*She let me take the bunny out of her mouth with a bunch of napkins so my fingers wouldn't touch it. She was bringing those bunnies inside the house and putting them by the fireplace to keep them warm and safe! I guess she thought the mother rabbit abandoned them while she went off to feed, as rabbits are known to do. You remember how Florabelle behaved after the shelter took her puppies away from her, always searching for them around the house and yard. I guess she thought she'd be a better mother to those bunnies than that careless rabbit. I wasn't sure what to do, but I couldn't yell at her because she was only doing what she thought was right. But then I realized the babies needed to be put back outside, so I gently scooped them up on a clean dustpan without touching them and put them back outside in the nest. I don't know what will happen to the babies, but if they're still alive in the morning, I'll call the county extension service and ask what to do. Don't laugh. This is serious!*

*Well, gotta go... I love you guys very much, and I can't wait to see you soon! XXXXXXXX*

*Love, Mom*

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Throughout Tony Whittaker's childhood and youth, he was known as "that good-looking Whittaker kid." Charming and sweet with an irrepressible sense of humor, Tony seemed to have an automatic get-out-of-jail-free card that protected him from blame for most of the mischief he caused at home and school. The only son in a family with four older girls, his mother and sisters catered to his every whim.

By sophomore year in high school, Tony had a reputation among teachers for his gift of gab and tendency to be the class clown. But he was a decent student and hard worker, excelling in varsity golf and basketball while maintaining a solid B average. This made him a shoe-in for class president, an election he won handily. During the summers, he worked for Whittaker Construction Company, the business started by his grandfather. But Tony had his own dream to become a professional golfer and follow in the footsteps of his idol, Arnold Palmer. During his senior year, he won a partial golf scholarship to the University of Florida, which he took to be a sign that he was well on his way to achieving his goal.

"Once I finish college and get on the pro tour, we can live wherever we want," he told Carole Hannah as they sat together, hands linked, on the glider of her parents' front porch. "Hawaii! California!"

The opportunity to go to college never materialized, however, after his father died of a melanoma diagnosed five months before. He passed away just weeks after Tony graduated from high school. Following the funeral, his mother made it clear that Tony would be expected to help his grandfather and uncles with the family business.

Numb with grief, Tony agreed to attend a nearby vocational school and learn the construction business.

"Your dad handled masonry and drywall. That'll be what you do, too," his uncle informed him.

It was the first time in his life that things hadn't gone according to some effortless plan. Devastated by the loss of his father and the cruel twist of fate that changed his life and his family's circumstances, he felt lost and confused. Without a healthy outlet for grief or stress, he developed a volatile temper that flared often when things didn't go his way.

It was Carole Hannah who kept him from falling into despair



during that first year after his father's death. She assured him that he could still become a professional golfer and that he could go to college someday, too.

"We'll make it work somehow," she said in an attempt to comfort him.

While she was away at college, the young couple kept up their romance through letters, phone calls, and weekend visits. They saw each other several times a month, but Tony, who was accustomed to near-constant attention from any woman in his life, found the separation nearly unbearable while Carole Hannah assimilated easily into campus life and enjoyed her studies. She decided to major in English, planning to return home to teach high school and marry Tony.

After her first year at Penn State, Tony became increasingly unreasonable, testy, and demanding. He sulked all summer, making pointed remarks that led her to feel guilty about her own desires, and then exploded in frustration as she packed for the fall semester of her sophomore year.

"I can't stand being alone all the time," he said angrily. "Why can't you transfer to the university here?" He stormed off, leaving her feeling anxious and sad.

After another two months, this litany of bad-tempered complaints led to a mutually heartbreaking decision to date other people until after Carole Hannah graduated. There was never any real bitterness, and they still talked about being together again someday. Tony believed that Carole Hannah was the true love of his life. But then Carole Hannah met Tim Lawson at a fraternity party her junior year and fell head-over-heels in love.

Meanwhile, Tony had begun spending time with Nora, a voluptuous brunette working as an assistant manager at the Dairy Queen. He dropped by every evening after work and eventually got her pregnant under the high school bleachers following a home game. They married when Tony was twenty and Nora was eighteen in a hasty ceremony at the Presbyterian Church. Two baby boys, Josh and Jack, followed within three years.

Meanwhile, Tony worked his way up in the family business and found that he actually enjoyed building homes and commercial

properties. Eventually, he took over as construction manager, a job formerly held by his uncle.

Those years passed quickly with Josh and Jack sprouting like cornstalks, excelling at sports just like their dad, and Nora seemingly happy at home with her arts and crafts. By the time the boys were in elementary school, the family moved into a new split-level just outside of town. He had to admit that, all things considered, marriage wasn't that bad. Occasionally, Nora made noises about wanting to work part-time at a crafts store, but he insisted that she forget the idea, arguing that they certainly didn't need her wages. After work each day, he stopped for a beer at the tavern on his way home, hit the gym most evenings after dinner, and usually headed back to the tavern after the boys went to bed.

Then one evening, Tony saw Nora's car in the parking lot of the BiLo grocery store and caught her locked in a passionate embrace with one of his roofing subcontractors.

"Tony, don't!" Nora screamed as Tony yanked the roofer out of his truck by his shirt collar and deposited him in the next parking space.

"You're fired!" he yelled at the stunned man and stormed around to the other side, where Nora sat rigidly, glaring at her husband.

"Get out of the truck! We're going home!" Tony yelled, and Nora, who had rarely heard Tony raise his voice, did as she was told.

She admitted the affair had gone on for nearly six months. "You're never home," she complained bitterly. "I didn't mean to fall in love, but now I want to be with him. I want a divorce."

"That guy won't be staying around here long," Tony said. His eyes turned steely and cold. "And if you go with him, I'll make sure you regret it. I'll take the boys."

"Don't you dare threaten me," she said indignantly, but became immediately silent when she saw the icy expression that passed over his face.

"I promise your life will never be as good as you had it with me, Nora," he replied, and left her alone at the kitchen table to contemplate her future.

Tony made sure the subcontractor never had the chance to work in Indiana County again. Then he moved Nora and their sons into a smaller home across town, where he could keep a close eye on his ex-

wife, too—just in case she met anyone else. They shared custody, since parenting was the only thing, other than sex, they did well together. Tony wondered where things had gone wrong in his marriage and vowed never to make the same mistake again.

He dated a few women from town and just beyond, but found them lacking the qualities he most wanted in a mate, although he couldn't specifically identify those necessary qualities. He had a vague feeling that something essential was missing from these relationships, and couldn't help comparing his girlfriends to Carole Hannah. It didn't help matters that the first love of his life was now divorced from her husband and that she occasionally visited Walkers Corner. She looked as good as ever, and her daughters were beauties, too.

One summer, a few years after Carole Hannah's divorce, she brought her girls to Walkers Corner for two weeks. Tony, who was well aware that Carole Hannah was single, invited her out for a late night swim. After too many plastic cups of wine at their favorite swimming hole, they ended up on a blanket under a nearby grove of trees.

Tony had Carole Hannah's bathing suit off in record time. Even if she'd had presence of mind to consider whether or not this was a good idea, it all happened so fast; all she'd been able to think about was the feel of his hands on her, and the way he moved against her.

Afterward, Carole Hannah knew the chemistry with Tony was still there. She lay with her head on his broad chest, listening to the fast beat of his heart and combing the fine, dark chest hairs. His fingers strummed her back and shoulders in that way she'd always loved, and he cupped her bottom with his hands to shift her more closely against him, as her knees tightened against his hips. She felt fifteen years younger, without a care in the world.

Several times that week, after Whitney and Riley were settled for the night, she crept out to meet Tony at his house for several hours of lovemaking, returning to her parents' home in the wee hours of the morning.

If Connie was aware of what was going on, she said nothing, although Carole Hannah felt certain her father knew. Throughout the next two weeks, Tony cajoled her into resuming their relationship while Carole Hannah agonized over whether or not they could make it work. By now, she was beginning to realize that outside of sex, she and Tony

had lost most of what they enjoyed in common. Tony was outspoken in his belief that higher education was a “rich man’s racket,” and Carole Hannah had lost most of her interest in western Pennsylvania sports trivia.

“Planes fly all the time between Kansas and Pennsylvania, Cee,” Tony said, as though the matter were already settled. “We’ll see each other as often as we can.”

“Tony, I don’t want a long-distance relationship,” Carole Hannah said firmly. “I need to stay in Kansas so the girls can be close to their father, too. Even if we aren’t living together anymore, we’re still their parents.”

By the end of her visit to Walkers Corner, she had a strong sense that history would repeat itself and that Tony would lose interest quickly in the idea of a long-distance relationship, which is exactly what happened. Within two weeks, he stopped calling and took days to return calls. On subsequent visits to Walkers Corner, she let it be known she was in a relationship with Kevin, and her relationship with Tony again became platonic.

On his first date with Carla Morgan, Tony was conscious of an ever-growing physical need, coupled with loneliness, and thought about how nice it would be to have a woman in his life full-time. He decided that Carla, with her bland, agreeable nature and decent cooking abilities would be a good wife. She was easy enough on the eyes, too, with frosted blonde hair and an impressive chest. They dated for six months until Tony became frustrated with the slowness of her movements, her ever-widening figure as she relaxed into the relationship, and her inability to have an original, interesting thought that didn’t come from a women’s magazine.

“I want whatever you want,” Carla often told him, although he soon realized this was the case only when his desires agreed with her own. But maybe it would be this way with any woman, he reasoned. As for the missing chemistry between them, well, that wasn’t everything and Carla was great with his boys. She’d taught both of his sons in second grade, and they loved Miss Morgan. Carla certainly deserved better than his criticism, he thought, and felt guilty that he couldn’t seem to love her more.

“I need time to think about what I want,” he told her in a fleeting



moment of agonizing clarity, breaking off their relationship. But the nagging feeling of doubt remained; he still wasn't sure what he wanted or why he felt so restless. The only thing he did know was that he was tired of dating a different woman every other month or so and still feeling alone.

Six months later, he was back with Carla and quickly gave her an engagement ring before he could change his mind. She moved into his house right away, and they settled into a pleasant sort of domestic life that pleased Carla, who enjoyed the financial benefits her new life afforded her. Tony came home every evening to a home-cooked meal and, if the lovemaking was nothing special, at least it was available several times a week. He often closed his eyes while they made love and thought of other women, mostly Carole Hannah. Life could be worse, he thought, wondering why this mature approach to love brought him no comfort.

Now that Carla had everything she wanted in life, Tony couldn't bring himself to break off their engagement, even if it meant sublimating his desires and marrying a woman who didn't bring him the happiness he imagined. It would also be hell getting her to move out of the house. He remembered his father's single-minded dedication to his business and the pride he took in providing well for his family. Tony's parents had never been affectionate with each other, but he knew they had taken their marriage seriously.

"You made your bed; now you lie in it," he told himself as he hit golf ball after golf ball against the net on the practice range. When he had emptied all the balls from his bag, he slammed the driver against a tree, snapping the club in two.



### Carole Hannah's Stoplight Pepper Slaw

- 1 small head cabbage, shredded
- 1 large carrot, skinned and grated
- 1 red pepper, seeded and diced
- 1 yellow pepper, seeded and diced
- 1 green pepper, seeded and diced
- 2 tbsp. light olive or canola oil
- 1/3 cup cider vinegar
- 2 tbsp. honey
- 1 tsp. garlic powder
- Freshly ground black pepper to taste

Mix together oil, cider vinegar, honey, garlic, and pepper. Toss with the cabbage, carrots, and tricolor peppers.

## Chapter 9

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SCOTTISH SUNDAY AT DOE RUN PRESBYTERIAN Church was a much-anticipated annual event in the life of its congregation. Under a periwinkle sky, with early autumn temperatures in the low sixties, it was the ideal day to show off one's Scottish attire. Parishioners, many of them decked out in their clans' ancestral plaids, arrived early to hang tartans on banners throughout the sanctuary. Several men were decked out in full Scottish dress, complete with kilt, jacket, hose, and flashes. Here and there, a dirk was tucked discreetly away, out of sight of Pastor Sherard, who allowed no weapons in church, not even on Scottish Sunday.

Carole Hannah looked admiringly at the myriad of tartans woven in every color of the rainbow as she gently fingered one family's plaid with its bright squares of blue, green, and thin lines of scarlet woven into the background.

Catching sight of Granny Nell in the front pew, she slid in beside her and linked fingers. A few minutes later, Sandy moved into the pew on the other side of Gran.

The choir, dressed in black robes with traditional red-plaid sashes, assembled behind the altar as Carole Hannah wiggled her fingers unobtrusively at Terry Macdonald, her friend since kindergarten, who was choir director and soloist. On Sundays, Terry had a lilting, ethereal voice when she led the choir in anthems and hymns. But when church was over, Terry's voice reverted to unadulterated, sexy power when she sang with her band, Street.

As the organist played a soft prelude to the service, Carole Hannah exchanged smiles with Reuben, who sat quietly on a bench behind the podium, Bible in hand. A big man with an even bigger heart, Reuben was just shy of six feet tall with a slight paunch, thanks to Althea's talents for cooking and baking. His hair was a silvery-grey and beginning to thin now, but he was still undeniably handsome. His slightly florid face, the result of uncontrolled rosacea, reddened even more noticeably when he got into a subject he felt passionate about during his sermons.

Carole Hannah glanced over at the pew across the aisle and smiled when she saw her father place his arm protectively around her mother's shoulders, their heads bent toward one other, as they watched their son.

The congregation stood for the first hymn, *How Great Thou Art*. Resounding chords from the organ swelled as the congregation's voices strengthened and rose at each refrain. When the last notes died and members of the congregation were settled again in their seats, Reuben put on his glasses and read a passage of scripture. "Today's reading is from Second Thessalonians, chapter three, verse five," he said.

"May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God the Father and to the steadfastness of Christ." Reuben removed his reading glasses and looked up at his congregation. "Let us live confidently in our faith, knowing that the Lord guides us in all of our choices throughout our days."

Carole Hannah glanced behind her in time to see Amos Gordon slowly making his way up the aisle in full Scottish dress as he played *Amazing Grace* on his bagpipes. Amos's bagpipes were traditional on Scottish Sunday, and his playing was flawless, as usual. A few of the children put their fingers in their ears. This, too, was tradition.

When it was time for the offering, Tony and Carla, along with three other couples, assembled in front of the altar. Reuben led the congregation in another responsive reading and extended the collection plates to their outstretched hands. With a tight, thin-lipped smile, Carla thrust the plate at Carole Hannah, who placed hers and Granny Nell's offerings in it and passed it to Sandy. Carole Hannah carefully avoided Tony's eyes as he stood, hands folded in front of him, before accepting the plate from Sandy and moving to the next pew behind theirs. Carole Hannah let out a deep breath and exchanged glances with Sandy. She

was certain it wasn't her imagination that she saw challenge in Carla's eyes.

As Terry stepped forward to sing the offertory solo, the organist began to play an introduction to the hauntingly beautiful *Be Thou My Vision*. Within moments, Carole Hannah was immersed in the notes of the beloved music and lyrics she had enjoyed since childhood. Granny Nell's eyes were closed in reverence, her blue-veined hand knotted in Carole Hannah's, as Terry's voice effortlessly rose on the high notes and fell into vibrant tones on the lower notes. When the song was over, Carole Hannah squeezed her grandmother's fingers. Gran continued sleeping.

After leading his congregation in the Lord's Prayer, Reuben stood up and moved to the lectern, fastened the button on his suit jacket, and tapped his microphone to check for sound.

"Good morning," he began. "On this glorious Scottish Sunday, I want to share some thoughts about guidance in our lives."

It was Reuben's habit to travel as he preached, moving in a predictable pattern down the three steps to the floor, over to the left, and then back across to the right before returning again to the podium. He never altered his course as he moved down the aisle and then back toward the front. Carole Hannah and Sandy exchanged silent looks of mirth. Reuben's movements while preaching were a never ending source of amusement to his younger sisters.

"Just as someone on a journey follows a map or these days GPS, we align ourselves with our teacher, Christ Jesus, to find our way," Reuben told his parishioners, who listened in rapt attention. "While we may question our choices and wonder about the options we see before us, there is a comfort and certainty we feel that we can never go too far off course when we listen for Divine wisdom and guidance that never fails to lead the way. We only falter, it seems, when we doubt."

Carole Hannah took in a deep breath as an anxious feeling washed over her, leading her to wonder how a person could ever know whether a decision was the right one. How was it possible to eliminate any trace of doubt and just trust? Even an informed decision or one made with the certainty of passion could still bring misfortune and pain.

"Making a wise choice is a benefit to our selves and others, whether it's a small decision involving our work or home lives, or a major choice

that will affect many lives beyond our own. Whatever decision is before us," Reuben said, squeezing Carole Hannah's shoulder comfortingly as he made his way back up the center aisle, "God is our internal guide, supporting what is good and best for our lives."

Now he turned and proceeded toward the front. "We create opportunities to hear that inner voice that we know is God speaking to us by getting quiet and listening through contemplative prayer with the full assurance that guidance will come. It may not be immediate, but it will come. Of that we can be certain. It is good to have faith and to trust that our needs will be met and that our decisions, when they are made in love and with pure intent, will bring happiness."

As Reuben ascended the steps to the lectern, he placed his hand on his heart and concluded, "We live confidently, knowing God guides us always in our choices. We have but to open our hearts and minds and listen to Him. And now, in the name of Jesus Christ, the people said—"

"Amen," the congregation answered in unison.

The organist immediately began the opening measure of the final hymn, *My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less*, as the service neared its completion. Carole Hannah was swept up in the cacophony of voices around her that swelled jubilantly with each refrain. Yes, she knew there were many blessings in her life, and whatever decisions she made for the future were now destined to play themselves out.

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It was a Sherard family tradition for everyone to gather at Gil and Connie's house for the Sunday evening meal. Granny Nell tossed tangy cider dressing into a salad of her late summer greens and tomatoes as Connie expertly whipped mashed potatoes until they were light as air.

"Mother, I caught you napping in church today," Gil said mischievously, filching a cherry tomato from the salad.

"I wasn't sleeping; I was merely resting my eyes," Nell replied curtly. "I think I might need to exchange these readers for new ones," she said removing them from her nose and peering at them suspiciously. "Yesterday, I mixed up rosacea cream for Ada Lewis—and by the way, Reuben, you could use some of my cream, too—and I almost used



catnip in place of comfrey. She would've had every cat in town falling for her."

Everyone laughed, except Reuben, as they sat down around the table.

"Gran, there are perfectly good medications for rosacea," he said. "In fact, I just got a prescription for face wash that Althea's been bugging me about for weeks."

This was a dangerous topic. All eyes turned to Granny Nell, but she simply shrugged as she sat down in the chair Gil held out for her.

"Some people prefer the natural way," she said. "Besides, it gives me a chance to see whether something else is going on with that person that might be the true cause of the disease."

Reuben's face darkened. "You mean like heredity?" He furiously buttered a slice of bread. "When are we finally going to move into the twenty-first century with our thinking? For the sake of my impressionable grandson, I'd like for us to begin by getting away from all of this talk of the Scottish Sight. It's downright medieval and could lead other people to wonder if we're true Christians. That's a problem for me as a pastor."

Evan, who had recently lost both of his front teeth, perched atop two phone books on one of the dining room chairs. "What's Thcottish Thight?" he asked as his mother moved his cup of milk farther away from his busy hands, anticipating the usual spill.

"Nothing, Evan," Reuben said, placing his napkin on his lap. "It's nothing more than ignorance about the mysterious ways that God works."

"God's gifts are mysterious, Reuben," Connie said softly. "But how else can God make things happen except by using people as His instruments? I think people do have special gifts that allow them to be helpful or to understand things others can't."

All eyes focused in surprise on Connie. It wasn't customary for her to speak up on this subject, since she normally deferred to Reuben on matters of religion and spirituality. Yet she was aware that Carole Hannah's insights had grown in ways that reminded her of Gil and his unexpected acts of kindness or unusual comments, as if reading her thoughts and needs.

Over the past month or so, Connie had clearly recognized the

deepening signs. Carole Hannah often commented or acted moments before Connie said anything that required a particular response from her. Perhaps it was time to finally embrace her daughter's highly developing sense of intuition and accept her special gifts. To shun her on some dogmatic high ground was unthinkable.

Carole Hannah sipped her tea and said nothing, recognizing that her mother was actually defending what she once had tried to deny.

"Humph." Reuben shot a disgusted look at Althea, who quickly looked down at her plate.

Gil handed his son a serving platter containing a roast beef rimmed with carrots and red potatoes.

"Son, please carve the roast beast. And, Sandy, if you'd be so kind, put a dab of mashed potatoes on Gran's plate."

Peace returned once again to the Sherard family dinner table.

After the meal, while other family members watched *60 Minutes*, Carole Hannah helped her mother do dishes before going outside to sit on the front porch glider with a cup of hot tea. The evening was growing much cooler, and she was glad to have Florabelle's warm body parked on top of her sandaled feet. She bent down to stroke the dog's velvet ears between her thumb and fingers and took a sip of tea, enjoying the silence and the glowing moon above.

The crunch of gravel disturbed her reverie, however, as a silver GMC Envoy turned into the Sherards' driveway. With a jolt that caused her to spill a few drops of tea on her jeans, Carole Hannah saw that it was Tony. She hadn't returned his call from a few days ago, preferring not to open doors that were best left closed. Besides, she didn't need trouble from Carla, who clearly was on red alert. Even so, something that felt suspiciously like her heart leaped into her throat.

"I thought something happened to you," Tony said as he bounded up the porch steps two at a time. "Are you avoiding me?"

"Well, maybe," Carole Hannah said mildly. "You're an engaged man." She moved over, dislodging the dog from her foot-warming perch as Tony sat down beside her. "I don't want Carla to think I've got my sights set on you...because I don't. It isn't right to do anything that makes her feel insecure."

"She's gonna feel insecure, no matter what you do," Tony said as he moved closer. "It's just how she is."

Carole Hannah shot him a warning look. "I didn't move back here to disrupt her life with you."

Tony slowly combed his fingers through his hair and let out a long breath. "She's definitely not happy that you moved back, which is weird because I always thought she liked you."

"She liked me before you became her fiancé, and I moved back to town. Don't be dense; she knows our history," Carole Hannah said. "Walkers Corner is too small for me to invite that kind of trouble."

"She has no right to tell me who I can be friends with or who I can't," Tony said irritably. "I get tired of always toeing the line so I don't make her feel jealous. I can't even look at another woman without hearing about it for days."

"Well, if there weren't some reason for her to feel insecure, I'm sure she wouldn't feel that way," Carole Hannah said pointedly. "And while we're on the subject, when are you going to marry her?"

Tony let out another sigh. "I ask myself that question all the time, and all I know is marriage scares the hell out of me. When Nora left, I swore I'd wait for the right person—someone I knew was perfect for me. Don't get me wrong: Carla is a good woman. She's a good cook and keeps a clean house. Nora wasn't like that. Sometimes I wonder if the whole chemistry thing is just crap. Is it better to marry someone you can depend on, who isn't likely to cheat?"

Carole Hannah sipped her tea thoughtfully. "Dependability and trustworthiness are important qualities in marriage, but so are companionship and compatibility," she said. "Marriage is supposed to be forever, or so they say, and if the chemistry isn't there, I would imagine it makes working at a marriage that much more difficult."

She pushed the glider back and forth with one foot. "Tim and I had that—the chemistry part. But overall compatibility was a big problem. We were very different people, and after the girls were born, we rarely did anything together. Eventually, we were living more like roommates. I honestly thought he was unhappy being married, and I felt hurt and abandoned. I wondered if it was better to be alone than to be together and *still* be alone."

"What happened with that other guy you were seeing?" Tony asked, turning to face her. "What's-his-face?"

"Kevin? That's a whole other story. I overlooked a lot of obvious

signs of trouble.” Carole Hannah curled one leg beneath her. “I thought because we started out as good friends and had some interests in common that it was a solid basis for a relationship. I knew he didn’t have much ambition and that he drifted from job to job. But I thought it was nice that he had time to spend with me and that he made me a priority.” She took a sip of tea. “What I didn’t know about Kevin was that he was a weak, dishonest man. He made me a priority because he was too lazy to put effort into anything else. I was supposed to be his meal ticket, I guess.”

She frowned, remembering more subtle signs of Kevin’s manipulative behavior. “Now that I know better, I realize that he was actually very controlling, only I didn’t want to see that at the time. I had to face the truth about him when he tried to hack into my bank account. He couldn’t figure out the password, and all the time he spent trying different possibilities triggered three e-mail alerts. Later that day, he asked me my mother’s maiden name and my hometown. Then I knew it was Kevin who tried to get into my account. He was out of work again, and I guess he thought I wouldn’t notice or remember if he helped himself to a little cash.”

“Did you press charges, I hope?” Tony asked, frowning. “When a guy does something like that, you know he’s capable of just about anything.”

“I decided it was better to just cut the cord—and my losses. It would’ve just dragged things out, when what I really needed to do was get him completely out of my life.”

Darkness had fully descended now. They didn’t touch, but Carole Hannah was conscious of the warmth of his body so near her own. She could smell the familiar spice of his aftershave and sense his mood as he spoke.

It wasn’t a big surprise then, when he turned to face her and asked, “How can I marry Carla and promise to be with her the rest of my life when it’s you I still think about? It’s always been you, Cee. I never understood why we stopped being together, but we could still have a chance to be happy, couldn’t we? You’re living here now.”

A lump formed in her throat, threatening to steal her breath. This was exactly how she had envisioned this conversation with Tony. It was a discussion, she also knew, that couldn’t be avoided forever.



Feeling the push and pull of desire versus her own good judgment, she took a slow, deep breath before answering. "Tony, I can't be the reason you break off your engagement to Carla. Whatever you decide, I'll always care for you. But you have a big decision to make, and I'm not going to be any part of that."

Tony stood up, touched her cheek with his hand, and leaned in to brush her lips in a warm, lingering kiss. "Well, just don't meet anyone else in the meantime."

Carole Hannah was silent, feeling troubled, as he walked back to his truck and got in. The sensation of his mouth touching her lips left a kind of vibrating hum. It had always been that way when he kissed her. How many times had she resurrected those kisses in her imagination? As for the lovemaking they'd shared, just the memory of those nights was enough for her to throw all caution to the winds.

The porch light went on and Connie peeked out the door, a question mark clearly visible on her face. "Is everything okay? Need another cup of tea?"

"Thanks, Mom, but Florabelle and I need to get going. It was a great dinner." She hugged her mother and headed to her car before Connie could ask any questions she wasn't prepared to answer.

Regardless of Tony's wishes, she knew she had choices, and nothing could happen that she didn't want or allow. But would stray thoughts accompanied by emotion-filled thoughts cause them to happen, anyway? She shook off the thought of Tony and concentrated on the welcome sight of her new home.

As she parked in the driveway in front of her cottage, she noted with a smile that the light from her Tiffany lamp made the etched-crystal oval on the front door twinkle in every shade of the rainbow. At that moment, it occurred to her that she hadn't felt this blissfully happy in any house since her childhood home.

"This is where I belong," she breathed as she opened the door to her cottage, centering her thoughts now on feelings of contentment, permanence, and peace.



### Sherard Family Salad Dressing

2/3 cup canola oil  
1/3 cup plus 1 tbsp. cider vinegar  
1 tsp. sea salt  
1/2 tsp. paprika  
1/4 tsp. freshly-ground black pepper

Mix ingredients in a cruet, and shake well.

## Chapter 10

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THE NEXT MORNING, CAROLE HANNAH SAT in her favorite chair by the north window and began her meditation. In one hand, she held a large chunk of crystal given to her by a Native American woman she had met in Taos. A white candle flickered brightly on the table next to the window, throwing shadows onto the wall. Breathing slowly and deeply, she began her “Ah” meditation, concentrating today on spiritual growth.

Since returning home, she had begun having more vivid dreams—prophetic dreams, actually—of people, places, and things that appeared in real life within hours or days. She wasn’t frightened by any of the dreams, although some left her wondering if she was interpreting the symbols correctly. Dreams were something that Granny Nell had talked about often, urging Reuben, Carole Hannah, and Sandy to remember and share their dreams. Together, they discussed the symbols, people, animals, or places that appeared, figuring out what might be their meanings. It was during one of these discussions that ten-year-old Sandy realized the paintbrushes that appeared in her dreams, instead of a fork and spoon at mealtimes, symbolized the importance of nourishing her artistic spirit.

“In dreams, we often know truths we can’t see when we’re awake,” Granny Nell explained.

Just a few days before, Gran had given Carole Hannah a pot of rosemary and told her to put a sprig of the fresh herb under her pillow each night to help with dream work and to enhance the quality of her

sleep. "Before you drop off to sleep, remind yourself that when you dream, you'll be aware that you're dreaming so that you can ask the symbols what they mean," Gran said.

After Reuben's sermon on listening for God's guidance, Carole Hannah believed her deepening sense of intuition and increasingly vivid dreams were how God intended for her to know whether she was on the right path and what was likely to come.

She still wasn't sure that this new life was in her best interests in the long run, but she felt a deepening sense of security and contentment in the familiar routines she was developing. Even if she eventually altered her decision, the sweetness of being home again was helping her to heal. Being alone so much now, whenever she wasn't working, also helped her realize that she could be content without a man. With this kind of emerging inner strength, it would be easier to wait for the right one.

But seeing Tony as she did most days, and knowing how he still felt about her, she couldn't help wondering if he would break off his engagement with Carla. She wasn't sure it was a good idea to reignite her past relationship with Tony, but she knew that it remained a strong possibility. Now that she was living here again, they'd certainly have more opportunities to be together and develop common interests.

Just as she considered this idea, her mind suddenly brought forth a vivid mental image of Carla, her face swollen and tear-streaked as she wept, clutching her wedding gown. She immediately released all thoughts of Tony.

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The tavern was already bustling when Carole Hannah arrived an hour earlier than usual for her shift in the kitchen. It was time for the bridge club's monthly meeting, which was always followed by a buffet lunch.

Holly tended to the needs of the elderly group that played bridge the first Monday of every month in one of the tavern's banquet rooms. The bridge players always requested the same buffet lunch: Italian wedding soup, baked chicken, poached halibut with lemon-dill sauce, cheesy potatoes au gratin, tossed salad, and yeasty rolls. For dessert, they had a choice of warm vanilla rice pudding or a vanilla ice cream sundae with chocolate sauce and sprinkles.

Carole Hannah stirred the bubbling pot of rice pudding while a vat of wedding soup simmered on the stove. Connie was busy preparing entrees.

"You and Tony get things straightened out?" Connie asked as she stirred cheese into the potatoes, slid the large pan into the oven, and spooned a mixture of garlicky butter and fresh rosemary over the chicken filets.

"There's nothing to straighten out, Mother." Carole Hannah sighed in exasperation. "Tony and Carla are still engaged. That means he and I are just friends." A thought suddenly popped into her head. "Are people talking about us?"

Connie raised her eyebrows, ignoring the question. "You're wise to put a stop to any ideas he has about you," she said. "I used to think you and Tony were meant for each other. But Tony has been drifting ever since his marriage ended, and I get the distinct impression that you've always known what you want and where you're going."

Carole Hannah laughed. "Not always, but thanks for the vote of confidence. Relationships are tough enough without bringing someone back into your life in a way that could hurt someone else."

"Good girl."

Holly sailed into the kitchen. "Did Tony kiss you yet?" she asked with an impudent grin.

Connie peered sternly over her reading glasses at her granddaughter. "If Tony did kiss your aunt, it certainly is none of your business, missy. I don't think Carole Hannah has any intention of inserting herself into that situation. Love triangles are exactly what we don't need in this town."

"Whatever," Holly said. "It'd sure be fun to watch the catfight between Carla and Aunt Cee. Carla would lose, for sure."

"Brat." Connie chuckled, shaking her head. "Not everything in this town has to be high drama."

By afternoon, the bridge players were playing out their final hands in the banquet room, satisfied now with pots of fresh coffee and raisin-filled cookies, and the regular lunch crowd thinned to a trickle of tourists stopping in for dessert and coffee. Connie hung up her apron and went home for the day, as she did most early afternoons now, leaving Carole Hannah to prep for the evening specials. Chef Jim did a

nice job filling orders from the regular menu, but rarely ventured into creation of new entrees. As she jotted down some ideas for a fish recipe with panko bread crumbs and herbs, Carole Hannah munched on a tuna salad sandwich and kettle-cooked potato chips. Yes, sometimes simple food was the most satisfying.

Holly came into the kitchen and stood directly in front of her.

"What's up, doc?" Carole Hannah asked, without looking up from her recipe notes.

"Jake just invited me and Evan to watch him work on a new sculpture. It was nice of him to invite Evan, too, don't you think? That way, I don't have to ask Mom to babysit."

Carole Hannah's eyes shot up at her niece. "I'm happy for you," she said sincerely. "I'm glad you're giving him a chance."

There was a new spring in Holly's step, and her blonde ponytail swung side to side as she opened the refrigerator door. She carefully removed a lemon meringue pie, sliced it exactly as she had been taught, and carefully transferred it onto a plate, garnishing the top with a lemon slice. Then she cut into a freshly-baked gob layer cake and prepared a tea tray for table seven. Carole Hannah watched closely, keeping an eye on portion sizes, and realized with pride that Holly was going beyond what was expected of her, picking up and serving orders. She was actually helping to fill them.

She remembered a much younger Holly, whose teen pregnancy was considered a disaster by the family. Having discovered that Holly and her boyfriend, Jeff, were having sex, Reuben angrily insisted that the two seventeen-year-olds marry immediately or stop seeing one another. Holly became pregnant right away, and Reuben and Althea were heartsick when Jeff abandoned Holly a few months before the baby was born. He didn't return to Walkers Corner for nearly three years, although his commanding officer made certain that child support checks were on time.

Jeff was no longer in the Army, and the support checks trickled in sporadically, often not for months at a time. He was often laid off from his job as a carpet installer, so it mostly fell to Holly to support their son. Jeff didn't even care to see Evan and was rumored to be involved with another woman who had a child. Holly was doing a commendable job raising Evan, but everyone in the family thought it would be nice



to see her happily in love with a responsible man who would be a good father to Evan.

"You know what?" Holly asked, balancing her serving tray expertly in her left hand. "I think Jake's been as nervous about this as I've been. He really is sweet. Okay, guess I ought to deliver these before the meringue slides off." Her giggle rang out as the door swung behind her.

Alone again, Carole Hannah sighed. "I'm glad my true love manifestation is working for someone around here."

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*To: EllenH*

*From: CookOnTheGo*

*Subject: Grant writing*

*Hope all is well and that you're not too stressed out dealing with year-end fundraising. I can't tell you how glad I am not to face that hassle anymore. I've been asked to do some volunteer grant writing, though, and I sure could use your help. Would you mind looking up a foundation on your database? It's the Arthur and Ethel Jones Miller Charitable Trust out of central Pennsylvania. If memory serves, they're interested in environmental projects. I wasn't all that excited about doing more grant writing, but how can I say no? Doe Run is important to me.*

*By the way, it was that biology professor from the university, Dr. Mark Baker, who asked me to do grant writing for this project. And yes, he's single (widowed, actually). Mom tells me his wife died of a heart attack. He rarely smiles, and he's awfully aloof, but I get the impression he's still grieving. Or maybe he just wants to keep things professional between us. Whatever the case, I've got too much to do these days to worry about romance. And yes, Tony is still with Carla, but that's probably for the best.*

*You asked me in your last e-mail if I still meditate every day. I'm attaching an essay I wrote a few years ago that can get you started. Remember, there isn't just one correct way to meditate, no matter what anyone tells you. It would be so helpful for your stress level if you could just do some deep breathing and quiet your mind for fifteen minutes every day. Seriously, try it for a few days and let me know how you feel. Don't worry if you can't keep thoughts from popping into your head. That's normal, too. Even meditation masters talk about that challenge.*

*Well, must run and scare up a costume for Saturday night. The tavern has a big party every Halloween, and Dad says he wants everyone in on the act.*

*Love, Cee*

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Gil Sherard had an uncanny ability to know exactly the right thing to say in any situation. It was as if someone was feeding him the proper response or explanation, and all he needed to do was write it down or repeat what he was told. After high school, he went to work as a copy boy for the Johnstown Tribune-Democrat, where he spent a year reading precipitation levels, cutting and pasting comic strips, running copy from the newsroom to the printing area, and taking obituaries from funeral homes for the next day's paper.

He commuted forty minutes each day from Walkers Corner to Johnstown in his Chevy Fleetline. After an eight-hour shift in the newsroom each day, he attended classes at the University of Pittsburgh's Johnstown campus, where he was enrolled in journalism studies.

Gil enjoyed college and found his classes easy enough, especially history and English. As he wrote papers for classes, he often felt that the writing was nearly effortless, almost automatic. He'd sit down at his typewriter and begin with a blank mind. Within an hour or two, the paper was done. Sometimes he didn't even remember what he wrote, and he was surprised when he proofread it. He chalked up this lapse of conscious thought while writing to his overactive ability to daydream.

After he was promoted to police and fire reporter, Gil went to the scene of numerous fatal accidents. After the drowning of three teenagers, whose car went off a low, rain-slick road into the Quemahoning Reservoir, Gil felt compelled to stay at the scene as he waited with the father of one of the boys. The man was devastated, his face ashen, as he waited for his son's body to be recovered from the murky, icy water.

Suddenly Gil felt a presence next to him and saw a tall skinny boy with dark hair standing before him. The man didn't see the boy and continued staring with a blank expression at the rescue scene going on in the water.

"Tell him I'll be okay," the boy said. "Tell him I love him, and I'm fine now."

Gil blinked twice. The boy stared at him impassively and repeated his message. Gil thought he might be hallucinating and said nothing as the boy continued standing before him. As a body was dragged onto shore from the submerged vehicle and identified as his son, the man began to cry—keening sounds like an animal in pain. Gil put his arm around the grieving father's shoulder and said, "I'm supposed to tell you that your son loves you. He wants you to know that he's fine now."

The man stepped back from Gil's arm in horror. "What the hell do you know?" he yelled. "Get out of here! What are you, some kind of freak?"

"I'm very sorry for your loss," Gil said softly, "but I know what I just said is true."

For years after the incident, Gil paid close attention to the messages he heard or saw in an effort to ask questions of bereaved families that were comforting, rather than intrusive. Sometimes he knew instinctively that background facts called in by funeral homes for obituaries were inaccurate, and he worked to correct them. After an accident or violent death, he sometimes stayed with the family while the police department finished its agonizing work. He got a reputation among the other reporters for being on "death watch," hurrying to the scene of an accident or fire as soon as he heard the police radio's ominous crackle.

He was careful not to talk about his experiences, even to Connie, whose strict upbringing left no room for this kind of discussion. He feared she would think him evil. Most people in Walkers Corner didn't understand his family's legacy or what it meant to have the Scottish

Sight. Hadn't his own mother been criticized over the years for her alternative healing activities and her ability to sit with people and tell them things about their lives that no one else could possibly know?

After he and Connie went into business at the tavern, Gil found that his ability to visualize someone's life troubles was helpful in his new role as bartender, allowing him to empathize with his customers. It also gave him the edge in negotiations with vendors and local government officials. He had no trouble mediating disagreements and often was asked to participate in town hall meetings. Customers who came to the tavern to nurse a beer found a sympathetic, listening ear, someone who didn't pry, but seemed able to draw out their troubles and suggest solutions. From those who grieved the loss of loved ones to depressed men out of work as one business after another closed, Gil listened and offered words of comfort and encouragement.

He became respected in the community for his wisdom and horse sense, always knowing what direction the borough should take in its governance or how much money could be raised toward the purchase of a new ambulance. He'd even been approached about running for mayor or city council, but joked that he had more influence as a bartender.

Reuben had the same ability, Gil knew, although Reuben found his psychic gifts a source of shame. When Reub wrote sermons or visited sick or troubled parishioners, he knew instinctively what messages people needed to hear. The truth, Gil knew, was that everyone had the ability to be intuitive to varying degrees. The Sherard family's highly-developed ability came from years of awareness of its presence, along with careful practice. Gil was certain that Reuben's life would be filled with less guilt and more joy if he embraced his ability and its use in service to his parishioners. Yet it was also true that each person needed to come to his or her own awareness of spirituality, and that inner growth was an intensely personal experience. Gil prayed that Reuben's spiritual journey would allow him someday to accept the truth about himself.

## **Tavern Poached Halibut with Lemon-Dill Sauce**

1 pound halibut filets  
2 cups water  
4 tbsp. butter (1/2 stick)  
1/2 cup fresh lemon juice  
2 tsp. dried dill weed or 4 tbsp. fresh dill  
2 tsp. minced garlic  
Lemon slices and parsley or fresh dill for garnish

In a deep skillet, melt butter and add water, lemon juice, garlic, and dill weed. Bring this mixture to a boil, and then quickly lower heat to simmer. Arrange the halibut filets in the liquid, being careful not to crowd them. Cover and simmer for 9 to 10 minutes undisturbed, until fish is opaque and flakes easily. Garnish with lemon slices and fresh dill or parsley.



## Chapter 11

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AS HE SET UP FOR THE tavern's annual Halloween party, Gil wiped down the glossy, varnished bar and tapped another keg of Shock Top; then he began slicing orange wedges to serve with each beer. He always looked forward to this Halloween celebration, which drew costumed party-goers from miles around. He knew tonight's festivities promised real magic for some.

By eight thirty, as guests began arriving in costume, Terry Macdonald and Street kicked up a set of high-energy Celtic and American tunes. Most of the dinner crowd was gone now as the staff greeted party guests and took drink orders. Gil's favorite Halloween tie, with its hideous skeleton head and large green-glowing eyes, blinked on and off when he pressed a pump in his pocket. Connie wore a white lab jacket and mad scientist glasses, her silver hair teased and sprayed into an excellent imitation of Albert Einstein's shock of hair. She wore a large button that said *Shock Top*.

Sandy's handmade butterfly costume drew appreciative comments as she hand-passed trays of appetizers and desserts among guests. Chiffon wings that perched across her shoulders fluttered in the air generated by overhead fans as she moved, and a light-green chiffon gown hugged her willowy figure. She had unfastened her customary French braid tonight to allow the glossy chestnut hair to flow about her shoulders. Golden antennae were attached to a thin headband, and she wore ballet slippers in glittering gold. Even her creamy skin seemed to glow.

Rev. Randall Shelby sat at the bar, his eyes fastened on Sandy's every

move, as he imagined her body underneath the sensual costume. He strongly disapproved of the celebration of Halloween, but the lure of seeing Sandy was stronger than his determination to shun the festivities. *That woman ought to have a real man in her life. Never mind that artistic nonsense*, he thought. In his mind, she was already his. Randall glared as he noticed several other male guests taking quick second looks as Sandy passed by with a tray of sausage-stuffed mushrooms.

After disregarding several more outlandish costume ideas, Carole Hannah had decided to be a garden fairy with a long blonde wig streaked with purple. She wore a purple-and-green satin outfit with flowing gossamer strips of fabric, tan-and-brown striped stockings, and a pair of high-topped sneakers. A magic wand with purple streamers was the finishing touch. The costume skirt was far too short not to wear something underneath, so she added a pair of purple running shorts.

Jake and Holly arrived together with Evan, dressed in coordinated costumes from Evan's favorite movie, *Peter Pan*. Jake was Captain Hook, complete with a silver hook at the end of his left arm. Evan, who insisted on being Smee the pirate, had a parrot attached to his shoulder. Holly's sparkling Tinker Bell costume came complete with gossamer wings. She sprinkled a handful of glitter from a basket over Gil's head, causing him to sputter and brush sparkles off his lower lip.

"Clap your hands if you believe in fairies, Grandpa," she said.

Gil placed his hands on either side of Holly's shining face and gave thanks for the happiness he saw.

Evan thrust an orange pumpkin treat bucket at Gil, his eyes bulging with excitement and too much sugar. "Trick or treat, smell my feet, give me something good to eat!" he sang manically.

Gil chuckled and dropped a Tootsie Pop and red Twizzlers into Evan's bucket. "Don't steal any of my gold coins," he thundered in mock concern before Evan took off like a shot to find his grandmother. No doubt, the kindergartner planned to double-dip.

While the band took a short break, Carole Hannah stopped to refill Terry's cup of hot water with lemon and honey.

"You look cute, Cee," Terry said. She paused. "I still can't believe you moved back here, though. Aren't you bored?"

"When would I have time to be bored? Anyway, this is my home, too," Carole Hannah said, and pointed out, "You stayed here."

"I don't know why I never left. There sure isn't much happening here." Terry looked around the room and sighed. "Most of the businesses that pay decently have left the area, and a lot of the people we knew in high school are long gone."

"That's true, but it's still better than being in a big city where the cost of living is so high and the lifestyle is completely insane," Carole Hannah said. "I've wanted to move back for a long time. Life is less complicated here, Terry. I can actually do the work I've wanted to do, rather than working at something I don't love just to make enough money to cover the higher cost of living."

She shrugged, surveying the partygoers around her. "After my house sold a few weeks ago, I was able to pay off the mortgage on my new house. I sure couldn't have done that where I lived before. Not to mention that I can sleep at night here without worrying about security systems. You can't put a price on peace of mind."

The front door opened for several newcomers, including Mark Baker.

"Well, lookit who just walked in," Terry said. "It's the most eligible bachelor in town."

"Really?"

"Cee, you *have* been away too long."

Mark wore indigo jeans and a long-sleeved white tee shirt. Wrapped around his torso was a tangle of vines and leaves.

"Who does he think he is, Adam?" Terry chortled. "I must say, that man could wear nothing but a banana leaf and still look great. The two of you should hook up tonight, since you're a garden fairy. If you don't want him, maybe you could touch him with your wand and make him cross-pollinate with me." She grinned and offered her best Groucho Marx impression.

"Terry!" Carole Hannah said, laughing and smacking her friend's arm, but her eyes were riveted on Mark as he accepted a beer from Gil and wandered over to where she and Terry were standing.

"Let me guess," Terry said. "You're supposed to be--?"

"Invasive species," Mark finished for her. "Japanese knotweed. *Fallopia japonica*, if you prefer the Latin."

"Ah, that figures," Terry said, rolling her eyes.

Carole Hannah touched Mark on the shoulder with her fairy wand. "Poof! Now you're harmless, decorative ground covering!"

Terry shook her head. "I think I'll leave you two nerds alone," she said and headed back to the corner, where her band was getting ready to play another set.

"You should try one of the gobs before they're all gone," Carole Hannah advised Mark. "My mother and I made them yesterday from our favorite family recipe."

Sandy, who was passing by with a tray of the cream-filled chocolate cakes, handed one to Mark. "These are little orbs of heaven; trust me," she said. "Here, have one."

Mark opened the waxed paper covering the gob and took his first bite. He closed his eyes in ecstasy. With his mouth full of chocolate and cream, Carole Hannah was free to study his face. *Interesting features*, she thought. *A face filled with character*.

When he was finished with his dessert, he said, "Hey, let's go outside for a minute so we can talk without having to yell over the music."

Carole Hannah pulled a knitted wrap around her shoulders and followed Mark out to the parking lot. The air was growing colder now, and a strong wind was beginning to kick up from the west.

"Let's walk a little," he said, apparently oblivious to the chill.

They made their way through the parking lot to stand beneath an ancient maple tree near the creek. As they walked, Carole Hannah was conscious that Mark seemed more relaxed this evening.

"I think I found a funding source for the project," he said, his breath visible in the night air.

"That's great." Her teeth began to chatter, and she huddled into her wrap. "Who is it and how much do you think we can get from them?"

"There's money available for water cleanup projects directly funded by coal companies' restitution payments," he said. "The Community Foundation is the conduit, and we can ask for up to \$100,000. The only catch is, the grant application is due by mid-December, and we have to match the money within six months. So we have to think about how much we can actually raise before we ask for the grant. That's the part I'm not so sure about."

Carole Hannah watched her breath rise in the frosty air. "It sounds



very promising,” she said. “I just sent an e-mail to one of my former coworkers and asked her to look up another foundation for me. But we also need to think of individuals and small businesses around here that might want to participate. The majority of big giving in this country is still from individuals, not foundations or even large corporations. We can get to the goal a lot faster by asking people who care about Doe Run to write a check immediately, rather than waiting for a foundation board to respond.”

“You’re the expert. That sounds like a plan,” Mark agreed. “Can you meet me in my office next Saturday to start working on the proposal?”

“I can, but not until late afternoon, say, around four thirty,” Carole Hannah told him. “I have to wait for our evening cook to get there.”

“That’d be great,” Mark said. He gave her the brightest smile she’d yet seen from him. “Maybe afterward we could grab a pizza, my treat. Come on, let’s get back; you look like you’re freezing.” He placed his hand on her back and left it there for a few moments before withdrawing it.

When they returned to the party, Mark excused himself to join a group of people he knew from the university. Carole Hannah glanced over and saw Carla and Tony dressed as Wilma and Fred Flintstone, sitting in one of the booths. She couldn’t help laughing at Tony, who looked surprisingly authentic as Fred.

“Yabba dabba doo, you two,” she said cheerfully. “Can I get you another drink or something to nibble on? A plate of pterodactyl wings, perhaps?”

“We’re just fine, thank you,” Carla said primly. “I fed Tony a big meal just before we came.”

Tony shrugged. “I could eat. I’ll take the loaded nachos.”

Carla’s expression changed. “Nothing for me, thanks,” she said tersely, her mouth set in a frozen line. She watched over Tony’s shoulder as Mark Baker reached out to touch Carole Hannah’s arm as she passed him on her way to the kitchen. Carole Hannah turned and said something to him, and they both laughed.

Tony whirled around at the sound, watching Carole Hannah’s animated face as she spoke, the way she used her hands to accentuate her words.



"I can't believe how Carole Hannah is coming on to Dr. Baker." Carla clucked her tongue as she sipped her glass of white zinfandel. "Mark's wife was such a wonderful woman; it would be impossible for Carole Hannah to take Kathleen's place. She couldn't hold a candle to her, in anyone's eyes."

Tony's jaw worked furiously back and forth. "You obviously don't know Carole Hannah," he snapped, fixing her with a cold stare.

Carla's eyes widened and filled with tears. She took a sip of wine and looked away, dabbing at her streaming eyes with a wadded up cocktail napkin, but said nothing more.

When his plate of nachos arrived, Tony dived in, shoveling food into his mouth and washing it down with great gulps of beer. He completely ignored Carla, who sat silently watching him. When he had eaten his fill, he pushed away the plate, along with his empty beer. Jumping to his feet, he rammed both arms into his jacket sleeves.

"Let's get out of here," he barked at Carla, and headed to the door as she fumbled to put on her coat.

She had difficulty keeping up with him as his long legs covered the distance to his truck. He had already started the ignition by the time she got to the vehicle.

"Why are you mad?" she asked tearfully.

"Forget it. Just get in."

"Tony, I don't think it's a good idea to--" She stopped when she saw the unmistakable look of red-faced contempt on his face when he turned to look at her. Something about his expression frightened her.

They drove the rest of the way home in stony silence. When he turned into the driveway, he pushed the button to open the garage door, but didn't drive inside.

"Go ahead and get out now."

Carla slowly stepped out of the SUV and waited for him to drive into the garage. When the vehicle didn't move, she walked around to where he sat, staring straight ahead. She rapped on the window and waited until he rolled it down.

"Aren't you coming in now?"

"Not now."

"When will you be home?"

"In a while," he said before abruptly hitting the button to close the

window. He backed out of the driveway and left her standing alone, biting her lip.

Within twenty minutes, Tony was back at the tavern.

Gil greeted him and took his drink order. "Carla tired?" he asked.

"Not as tired as I am," Tony said.

## Sherard Family Favorite Gobs

4 cups all-purpose flour  
2 tsp. baking soda  
1/2 tsp. baking powder  
1/2 tsp. salt  
1/2 cup unsweetened high-quality cocoa powder  
2 cups sugar  
1 cup boiling water  
1/2 cup shortening  
2 large eggs  
1 cup sour milk  
1 tsp. vanilla

Preheat the oven to 450 degrees. In large bowl, sift together flour, baking soda, baking powder, salt, and cocoa powder. Set aside. In a medium bowl, cream together sugar and shortening. Add beaten eggs and mix until ingredients are combined.

Alternate addition of dry ingredients and buttermilk to sugar and shortening mixture until combined. Add vanilla. Very gently, pour boiling water into bowl and mix ingredients well.

Drop 2 tablespoons full of batter for each cookie onto ungreased cookie sheet, and bake gob cookies 5 to 6 minutes. Cool completely on wire racks.

\*To make sour milk, add 1 tablespoon white vinegar or lemon juice to milk.

## Gob Filling

5 tbsp. all-purpose flour  
1 cup fat free milk  
1 cup trans-fat free margarine  
1 tsp. vanilla extract  
1/2 box powdered sugar

Mix milk and flour in a two-quart saucepan and stir constantly over

low heat until mixture is very thick. Allow to cool and add margarine, vanilla, and powdered sugar.

Place a heaping tablespoon of filling between two cooled gob cookies, and wrap in squares of waxed paper. Refrigerate any gobs that are not eaten immediately.

## Chapter 12

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ON ELECTION DAY, LIFE REVOLVED AROUND the Walkers Corner Volunteer Fire Department, where voters dutifully cast their ballots and participated in the unique social traditions of the community. Candidates were running for judge, county commissioners, and tax collector—a low voter turnout election, normally. But this year, there was a hotly-contested county commissioner race and an incumbent everyone wanted to see thrown out. Most of the townspeople were Democrats, but conservative in their social and fiscal beliefs. Those citizens who were more moderate remained silent, except in private, when they felt comfortable expressing their views.

This year, there was yet another reason to vote: the chance to win a new hunting rifle, courtesy of the Fraternal Order of Police.

By seven o'clock that morning, members of the volunteer fire company auxiliary began serving pancakes and grilled sausage patties. By lunchtime, the menu would change over to hot dogs and kielbasa, smoky baked beans, and Matilda Matheson's famous pineapple-marshmallow coleslaw. After lunch, an enormous bake sale table was set up, followed immediately by a spaghetti dinner with vats of sauce and meatballs, hunks of buttery garlic bread, trays of tossed salad, and even more cookies. Election Day food sales supported the fire department throughout the year, and it was considered rude and downright disloyal for voters not to buy something to eat when they came to cast their votes.

Boldly hand-lettered posters behind the food tables proclaimed



*What if your house caught on fire? Who would show up? A strong fire department matters!!!* Many people laughingly commented every year about the implied threat to those who didn't buy food, but no one took any chances.

Not surprisingly, the Creekside Tavern experienced a significant reduction in food sales on Election Day, but business at the bar picked up following the close of voting (and, just as important, announcement of the winner of the gun raffle). It wasn't unusual for customers celebrating wins or suffering losses to stay out later than usual as they enjoyed one more draft beer.

The "fahr hall," as locals pronounced it, was the place where everyone gathered during Election Day to visit with friends and neighbors, and to watch and listen as various groups performed songs, skits, and dances. The kindergarteners were the first to sing at eight o'clock, just after the Veterans of Foreign Wars led those assembled in the Pledge of Allegiance and an off-key rendition of *The Star Spangled Banner*.

Holly stood back nervously as Evan, dressed in his best button-down shirt and khaki pants, clambered onto the stage with the thirteen other boys and girls in his class. He was a full head taller than the other children and nearly a year older. Just before Evan's fifth birthday, Holly decided to keep him in preschool another year before sending him to kindergarten, believing that her overactive little boy would fare better socially if he had another year to mature. But there was a more serious issue to consider. She needed Evan to be in child care when he wasn't in school, but could barely afford the tuition for the few available after-kindergarten programs. Despite so many family members nearby, no one was available to stay every afternoon with Evan while Holly worked at the tavern. Grandma Althea worked afternoons in the church office, and Granny Nell was too busy to do more than fill in on an emergency basis.

Eventually, as the childcare situation became critical and Holly nixed the daycare center because it was too large and a family daycare home because of poor housekeeping, Althea convinced Reuben that Evan should stay with her after kindergarten. Holly was grateful for her mother's help, knowing how much her father relied on her and also being well aware that the church couldn't afford to hire another employee.

"Don't do that!" Holly mouthed silently to Evan as he gleefully mimicked the words of the announcer.

As the children prepared to sing, Carole Hannah and Sandy quietly joined the audience.

Herded into place by their teacher, the children sang their favorite song, *Fifty Nifty United States*. It was a song that every child in Walkers Corner learned in kindergarten, since it allowed them to memorize the names of the fifty states in alphabetical order. It was the type of song that inevitably led parents to complain that they couldn't get it out of their heads.

This year, Holly was one of those parents. "I didn't realize how annoying we were when we sang that song until Evan started singing it all the time," she groaned to her aunts. "Poor Mom and Dad had to put up with all three of us singing about the fifty states. Evan sings it from morning till night."

"Yes, but Holly," Sandy teased, "which states come after Iowa?"

Holly groaned. "Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine."

"Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan," Carole Hannah and Sandy piped in unison.

The children sang their song in a variety of ranges and notes, punctuated by giggles and other inappropriate behavior that caused several parents to hold up warning fingers and put on their most stern expressions. Evan sang with unbridled restraint, his mouth open as wide as possible, as a little girl in front of him stuck her fingers in her ears and glared backward at him. Holly and her aunts were hard-pressed not to laugh out loud.

Next, the Walkers Corner Firecrackers and Sparklers, a drill team of youths ages nine to seventeen, stepped up to the platform. The drill team, which was undefeated after nine straight years in regional scholastic competitions, was the pride and joy of Walkers Corner. They were a regular featured attraction at fire hall pig roasts, bingo, and every holiday picnic or parade.

"Carole Hannah was just a plain old flag twirler. I was a fire baton twirler," Sandy hissed to Holly with a wicked grin at her sister. "We won State two years in a row!"

Nevertheless, it had been the fire baton twirlers that necessitated a civic council ordinance requiring the group to perform alongside the

volunteer fire department's fire truck and ambulance. To date, no one had ever witnessed a twirler or spectator on fire, but like fire department food sales, no one took any chances.

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Sandy Sherard loved the often amusing traditions of her hometown and the colorful people who lived there, even as she rejected many of their expectations of her. She knew that many people saw her as odd—a woman in her mid-forties, who made her living in art, refused to marry, and didn't even have any illegitimate children.

From the time she was seven, Sandy's single, driving focus was producing art. She sketched and painted while other girls her age played Barbie dolls and arranged their dollhouses. Her one concession came when she designed clothing for Carole Hannah's Barbie and Ken dolls and constructed three-dimensional cardboard furniture for their dream house.

Naturally, it was assumed that she'd become an art teacher, but Sandy carefully nurtured her own creative aspirations and dreamed of having art exhibitions around the country. Someday, she dreamed, people would read about her in art history books and study her paintings. It wasn't that teaching couldn't play an important role in her career. In fact, she rather enjoyed the idea of helping others express their creativity. It was just that she intended to be well-known and respected for her own style of art. She vowed not to become one of those art teachers who stifled their own creativity and then became openly critical and hostile of students who exhibited talent far greater than their own.

In high school, while other girls dated, gossiped, and had their hearts broken, Sandy Sherard planned her brilliant art career. During junior year, she briefly dated tall, handsome George Ross, whose efforts in clay and ceramics impressed her very much. He was a year ahead of her in school with good prospects for a career in heating, ventilating, and air conditioning. Sandy ended their relationship the night of the Christmas Cotillion.

As the popular strains of *Precious and Few* played on the phonograph and couples slow-danced in a clockwise circle around the school gymnasium, George guided Sandy in a stiff box step. "Just imagine dancing like this the rest of our lives," he said, pecking her on the lips

quickly so the chaperones wouldn't notice. "It'll be so great after you graduate and we can get married."

Sandy backed away from him in surprise. "George, I can't marry you. I'm going to art school," she said. "I've already told you I'm going to be an artist and travel. I might never get married."

George chuckled indulgently and placed his hand low on her back. "I'm sure lots of wives and mothers paint. As long as you're having fun, that's all that matters."

Sandy took his hand and guided him off the dance floor to two chairs alongside the gym floor. "George, you're such a nice boy, but I don't want to lead you on," she said gently. "I'm sorry."

When George cried in the car, unable to understand why she was breaking up with him, Sandy patted his shoulder reassuringly. "I'm sure there are a lot of girls who would be happy to marry you. You'll make a wonderful husband and father."

As teenagers, she and Carole Hannah had been advised thoroughly on the subject of boys by Granny Nell, who told them, "Just because someone decides he loves you does not mean he gets the final word. In this case, what you want counts even more. Be picky."

Yes, Sandy was picky, but never teasing or mean-spirited. She was careful not to lead a man to believe there could be anything more than a dating relationship. Indeed, she was unfailingly honest from the start, telling each man as soon as the subject came up that she didn't need to be married to be happy. Men didn't always believe what she told them, however. They figured she was playing hard to get and would change her tune when they produced a diamond solitaire. Stubbornly, they continued courting her, trying to steal her time, and expecting her to put her own needs aside and make them the center of her world. Their priorities of weekend sporting events and six-packs of beer in the back seat of their cars were not her priorities.

Inevitably, a ring was produced and Sandy had to graciously tell them, "Thank you, but I can't marry you," and another disappointed male joined the ranks of men who loved and lost Sandy Sherard.

Despite the ongoing rumors that Sandy didn't "like men," there was a continual stream of eligible suitors that vied for the chance to win her favor. With her uncommon beauty and sweet personality, Sandy was often told she could have any man she wanted.



To be sure, there was only one man she had ever truly wanted, and she loved him with all her heart. He was also the only man who had ever agreed to her terms, and they enjoyed a passionate, long-term, and very secret relationship.

Bill Stein was an investment banker from Pittsburgh, who buried his own creative desires by living vicariously through artists and musicians whose work he particularly enjoyed. Dark and handsome, soft-spoken, with a quick, gentle wit, he had an elegant, effortless way about him. While admiring a pen-and-watercolor painting of a bridge across the Monongahela River, the artist herself appeared. It was Sandy's first one-woman exhibition, and her explanations of inspiration and composition were so heartfelt, Bill felt compelled to invite her to dinner. Within weeks, they became lovers.

It was two years later before he confided to Sandy that he wanted to marry so that he could become a father.

"Bill, you know I don't want to get married," Sandy said.

Bill cleared his throat and looked away, embarrassed. "I'm Jewish, Sandy. My family expects me to marry a Jewish woman. I'm supposed to produce a son to pass along the family name, and my family is strict about not marrying outside the faith. I really want kids."

"I get it," Sandy said. "If you want kids, you ought to have them."

With his parents continually arranging blind dates with women from their synagogue, Bill knew he couldn't put off the inevitable. Yet no one captured his attention the way Sandy did. With her passion for art and lovemaking or simply her ability to engage in the most stimulating conversations Bill had ever enjoyed with a woman, she was infinitely intriguing. Deep down, he couldn't imagine loving anyone else.

At least twice each week, Bill made the hour-long drive between his home in Pittsburgh and Sandy's home in Walkers Corner, bringing with him a bottle of wine and a couple of steaks or sea food. Sandy produced salads and soups brought home from her family's restaurant. Since she lived on the outskirts of town, no one was aware of her relationship with Bill, and that was for the best, she thought. During those years, Sandy never introduced Bill to family or friends. She knew the inevitable questions would be too hard to answer. Besides, what was the point?

Everyone would want to know whether marriage was in their future,



and that was out of the question, if for no other reason than the Stein family's strong religious beliefs. Reuben would express concern that she was involved with someone outside their own family's faith. Sandy, who attended the Presbyterian Church most Sundays, was deeply spiritual and loved the rituals and traditions of her home church. And anyway, the subject of religion rarely came up in conversations with Bill. That wasn't what their relationship was about. She put out of her mind the inevitable and lived for each moment with him.

But then Bill had another birthday and the urge to become a parent began to consume him. He watched his small nephews and nieces with wistful longing.

"I'm going to have to get married soon so I can have some kids," Bill confided one night as he and Sandy lay quietly by the fireplace.

"You need to do whatever makes you happy," Sandy said, raising herself up on one arm to look into the eyes of the man she loved.

"You make me happy," he answered sadly as his heart turned over at the thought of having to end their relationship.

Another year went by while Bill dated eligible women from his synagogue and surreptitiously visited Sandy a few times a week. Sandy was content to hold him quietly in the night, knowing that each moment with him was a gift, dreading the moment she'd have to stop seeing him. She thought of Granny Nell's advice so many years ago to her granddaughters, "You shouldn't necessarily marry everyone you love." Sometimes it was better not to have that option, she thought.

A year later, Bill wedded Christina Harvey, a thirty-eight-year-old accountant, whose biological clock was ticking in a rather public way. Christina was matter-of-fact about her marital expectations. "After the wedding, we'll start having children. I'd like two."

The couple had Amy and Abby in rapid succession. Having proven that she could produce two children, Christina felt her life was complete. She began sleeping in the guest room near the girls, claiming that Bill snored. In fact, this wasn't true. Bill grieved his chance to have a son while he tried to accept the lack of intimacy in his marriage. Bill loved his daughters to the point of distraction and worried that he wasn't a good enough father. But Amy and Abby loved their daddy's gentle manner and goofy sense of humor. As they grew, they felt closer to him than to their distant, critical mother.

During the first years of Bill's marriage to Christina, he stayed far away from Sandy, who grieved silently, but was in complete agreement.

"You need to put your best foot forward in your marriage," she said tearfully weeks before the wedding. "Please don't call me again."

A series of paintings, all studies of Bill from the memories still so vivid in her mind's eye, were carefully hidden away in her attic. A popular anchorman on the evening news had a voice similar to Bill's, and every time Sandy heard the announcer's voice, she felt a tug on her heart.

On some level, she knew Bill had married not for love, but rather for biology. She missed him terribly, but also sensed strongly that she would see him again someday. Like planets moving together across the universe, Bill and Sandy were on the same orbital path.

Sooner than she might have expected, they ran into each other at a gallery opening in Pittsburgh. Following dinner and too much wine, they spent the night together. By then, Bill knew his love for Sandy couldn't be denied. It was easy to claim overnight business trips and slip away to her arms a few times a week. If Christina was aware of the relationship, she never said a word. As far as Bill could tell, there was no difference in the quality of their marital communication before or after his relationship with Sandy resumed. In fact, Christina seemed relieved whenever he was gone.

Even after Bill returned to Sandy's bed, the future between them was never discussed, and she liked it that way. It seemed to be a fact of life that men needed more in the way of daily upkeep from a woman, and she would always have to give more to a relationship than she received. Sandy Sherard was no fool for love.

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*To: WhitneyL; RileyL; and BoT*

*From: CookOntheGo*

*Subject: Thanksgiving*

*We're all excited that you've decided to come here for  
Thanksgiving! I've got so many fun things planned for us. We'll*

*have Thanksgiving at the tavern, and then we can have an early Christmas the next day at our house. Of course, we need to decorate the tree, too. I brought all of our favorite ornaments with me. Whitney, remember that little blue-and-gold yarn cheerleader that Grandma gave you the year you wanted to be a professional cheerleader?*

*Riley, I'm counting on you to help me figure out what to serve for Christmas dinner. E-mail me your ideas.*

*Bo, you haven't lived till you've had Thanksgiving dinner at the Creekside Tavern. We put out quite a spread. Aunt Althea will bake pies – pumpkin, apple, mincemeat, and pecan. I'll make our favorite orange-Dijon turkey and a pork tenderloin roast. Grandma Connie will do all of her famous side dishes.*

*By the way, the cookbook is progressing amazingly well, even though I haven't had as much time to work on it recently. I hope the whole thing will be finished by next May.*

*Let me know your flight schedules into Pittsburgh, and I'll be there to pick you up. With any luck, we won't have an early snowstorm. Be sure to bring clothes for this changeable Pennsylvania weather, including boots.*

*Love, Mom*

*P.S. Riley, please remember to send me a copy of the bills for next semester's tuition, room, and board.*

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The following Saturday afternoon, Carole Hannah wandered through the silent halls of the university's science building, searching for Mark's office. Along the way, she passed labs and seating areas where harried students worked on mid-term projects or hunkered down in study groups.

She turned left down a long, deserted hallway and continued to

the end until she saw a sign on a closed door, *Mark A. Baker, PhD*. She rapped lightly on the door before he opened it, flashing a quick, slightly uncomfortable smile when he saw her. He looked nice, she thought, in his crisp button-down shirt, pressed khakis, and grey fisherman's sweater.

"Hi. Did you have any trouble finding me?"

"A little," she admitted. "I haven't been on campus in years. It took me a few minutes to locate this building."

He carefully hung her jacket on a hanger while she admired his office décor and the expansive view of the campus from his window.

Mark may have looked the part of an academic, she thought, but his office was clear evidence that he was anything but the proverbial absentminded professor. His work space was clean and professional with attractive, masculine furniture and a large desk neatly organized with a stack of red-marked test papers and a laptop. Several professional journals were fanned out on a nearby table.

"I thought we could use this laptop," Mark said. "Please take my chair." He held it out for her and then perched at the edge of the desk, leaning over her shoulder as she opened a new Microsoft Word file. "I'll let you tell me how we should proceed."

She smelled the bergamot in his aftershave and recognized it immediately as one of her favorites. *Stop it*, she told herself. Taking a deep breath, she said, "First, let's start with the section that explains the need for this project. It may not be sexy, but it's got to grab the funder's attention." She blushed, realizing what she'd just said.

Mark cleared his throat. "It's difficult for me to think of acid mine drainage in terms of 'sexy,' but I'll do my best."

They worked without stopping for the next hour. While he explained history, facts, and statistics about the need for funding, Carole Hannah wove the information into a cohesive, succinct narrative that painted a word picture for the uninformed reader. When he stopped to gather his thoughts, she supplied information that described the way Doe Run had looked at its most polluted stage—its orange color the result of metals, mostly iron pyrite, exposed to air and water.

"In this environment," Mark dictated easily as she typed, "the water is not habitable to most fish, except species that are able to survive in an acidic environment."



Carole Hannah inserted a section that explained the loss of commerce to the region as a result of the polluted water.

"Hmm, nice touch," Mark said as he read over her shoulder. "I mostly think in terms of the water pH or what species used to be there or what types of fish and algae are able to live in the water. It's a good idea to explain what it means to people who live near the water and need Doe Run for their livelihoods. I doubt most people realize the importance of tourism to a community the size of Walkers Corner."

"Without tourists, our tavern and inn wouldn't have any guests other than local families," she said. "In fact, we might have gone under by now."

Mark frowned and scanned his notes. "Okay, this part is important." He began dictating another section. "With its strong history of collaboration with other government and civic agencies, and its experience with the first phase of the remediation project, Doe Run Canoe Club is the most qualified nonprofit organization to manage the project."

He would have been a good debater, she thought, as he anticipated questions that might be posed by the foundation and talked in a fluid manner about how the canoe club had already demonstrated its competence to oversee the project.

Without missing a beat, he dived into the project description, where he made his case for the approach he and other environmental experts believed would have the best chance for success. He made a point, however, of stating that the plan wasn't written in stone and cited potential challenges that might necessitate change and how those challenges would be addressed.

Carole Hannah was impressed with his narrative as her fingers flew over the keyboard. When he stopped talking for several moments and began looking pensive, she looked up at him expectantly, fingers poised over the keyboard.

Mark stretched his arms over his head and blew out a long breath. "That's enough for today. I'll prepare information for next time about who will do the work, their credentials, and qualifications."

"Along with measurable objectives to show how we'll evaluate their work and prove that the canoe club didn't abscond with the grant money and buy themselves new fiberglass kayaks," Carole Hannah



reminded him, leaning back in the chair. It was intended as a joke to diffuse the tension and silence that had fallen over Mark.

He stood up, hit save on the toolbar, and shut down the laptop. "I don't know about you, but I'm starving. Are you ready for that pizza?"

They drove separately to a pub nearby that was a popular hang-out for college students and where, it turned out, several of Mark's students were servers.

"Hey, Dr. Baker," one after another exclaimed. They eyed Carole Hannah curiously while she tried to blend into the background.

"A lot of my students are here," Mark said in an understatement as yet another co-ed called out to him.

After ordering a pitcher of pale wheat ale and a medium pizza with everything, Mark crossed his arms on the table. "You haven't told me how you're adjusting to life in a small town. It must seem pretty tame after living in a bigger place."

"Walkers Corner tame? With all the characters we have running around there?" She laughed.

"Don't you miss Kansas?"

"I miss the good times I had in Kansas," she said truthfully. "But I never intended to stay away from here so long. My husband was from Kansas; that's why we moved there. I wouldn't say I was unhappy living there, but Kansas never felt like home. For one thing, there are no mountains." She smiled.

"Do you have kids?"

"I have two grown daughters, Whitney and Riley."

"Were they upset that you moved back here?"

"For a while they were, but I think they understand why I want to be here and that it's time to give my parents a hand with the business. I never thought seriously about moving, though, until Whitney, my oldest daughter, moved to Chicago and got engaged, and Riley, my youngest, went away to college. I realized I was still hanging around our big old house waiting for them to come home, which they don't do that often anymore. Kids get busy with their own lives." She took a sip of beer. "Then some things happened earlier this year that convinced me it was time to think about a life makeover." She didn't elaborate.

"You may have heard that my wife, Kathleen, died last year," Mark said abruptly. "It was a huge shock. She was always so active, the picture

of good health. I got a call that she was in the emergency room after fainting on the golf course. I didn't find out until I got to the E.R. that she was actually gone."

"That must have been terrible for you," Carole Hannah said, shuddering. "It scares me when I hear that the symptoms for heart attacks in women are so vague." She shook her head. "Maybe Kathleen didn't even know what was happening to her. Sometimes the symptoms that men get, like pain radiating down the left arm or jaw pain, don't even happen to women. They might just feel a little nauseated or dizzy. There probably was no way for her to tell what was happening."

"I swear, she never said a word about any symptoms she might have been having," Mark said. "If she had, I would've moved heaven and earth to get her to see a cardiologist." His eyes had that faraway look he sometimes got when he was immersed in deep thought.

"And you're handling this as well as you can, even though you think the pain will never end," Carole Hannah said softly. "You also wonder whether you missed something that might have been a warning that something was wrong."

"Yeah, right," Mark said, looking earnestly at her. "You've got that exactly right."

"And you also wonder if you can ever really heal emotionally and move forward with your life when the memories of Kathleen are still so strong and so good. You never expected to be alone, at least not this early in your life. You also think that moving on with your life might be disloyal, not just to her memory but to your son."

"Yes, exactly," Mark said, staring at her. "You're very perceptive. Hey, wait! How did you know I had a son?"

"I guess you must have mentioned him before," Carole Hannah said. She took a quick sip of beer.

"Michael will be here for Thanksgiving with his wife and my little granddaughter," Mark said. "I'm thinking they might be more comfortable if they stay at the inn so Kerri, Michael's wife, doesn't feel that she has to do a lot of cooking for us."

"We always include guests in our family's Thanksgiving dinner at the tavern. Of course, you're invited, too," Carole Hannah said.

Mark flashed a look of such gratitude and relief; she knew it had been exactly the right thing to suggest.

"That'd be ideal," he said, swallowing hard. "You probably also knew that I wasn't looking forward to having Thanksgiving dinner at the house, not when Kathleen always did such a great job making the holidays special. Last year, I skipped Thanksgiving because I knew I couldn't possibly make it as nice for Michael as his mother did. They went to Kerry's parents' house, instead. I was invited, too, but I just couldn't make myself go."

"It's only normal you'd feel that way," Carole Hannah said. "And this year, my family will be thrilled to have you join us. You'll have a chance to meet my daughters and my future son-in-law, too. It won't be a quiet evening, but you're sure to have a good meal, and you won't be alone."

## Matilda's Pineapple-Marshmallow Coleslaw

1/2 cup low-fat sour cream  
1/4 cup low-fat mayonnaise  
1 tsp. sugar  
1/2 tsp. salt  
1/8 tsp. freshly-ground pepper  
4 cups cabbage, finely shredded  
8 oz. can pineapple tidbits, drained  
1 cup miniature marshmallows

In a medium bowl, mix together sour cream, mayonnaise, sugar, salt, and pepper. In a large bowl, combine cabbage, pineapple, and marshmallows. Stir sour cream dressing into cabbage mixture. Chill.

## Chapter 13

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WHITNEY, RILEY, AND BO ARRIVED UNEXPECTEDLY together on the same flight from Chicago the day before Thanksgiving. Carole Hannah double-parked her Subaru in the bustling arrival area of the terminal, ignoring the whistle-blowing security officer's loud reprimands, as she greeted her adult children with hugs and kisses.

"You all got here at the same time! How did you manage that?"

"We were able to get on the same flight out of Chicago that Riley connected with," Whitney explained, dropping a bulging carry-on bag to the ground with a thud before hugging her mother. "When we were ready to board, she never even noticed we were in line right behind her."

"Why didn't you text me what flight you were taking? I'm not like Mom; I can't read your minds. And I did so recognize you, after I heard you making fun of me," Riley countered.

Carole Hannah exchanged smiles with Bo while the girls continued their good-natured sparring.

"It's good to know some things never change," she said with a grin.

Bo piled suitcases into the back of the wagon while Whitney and Riley climbed in together in the back seat. Bo sat up front with Carole Hannah and began fiddling with the buttons on the climate control and radio.

"Just because you're my co-pilot doesn't mean you can fiddle with



the instrument panel,” Carole Hannah teased. “You may do whatever you want in your own plane. Let me be the captain of this Subaru.”

The drive from Pittsburgh International Airport to Walkers Corner was about ninety minutes; that is, if there wasn’t much traffic on the parkway through the tunnels. Unfortunately, traffic was predictably heavy the day before the holiday, and they inched along for several miles before hitting I-376 at a more normal rate of speed. Meanwhile, the girls updated their mother on recent events in their lives, most of which they’d already told her by phone or e-mail, but that everyone agreed was more satisfying shared in person.

“I’m afraid there isn’t all that much new to report from Walkers Corner,” she told them. “Same old, same old; probably the most interesting local news is the budding romance between Jake the tree-carver and your cousin, Holly. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if there isn’t a wedding sometime in the next year or so,” she predicted. “After Holly ignored Jake for two years, he finally got her attention. Now they’re making up for lost time.”

She filled them in on other people they were sure to meet while in Walkers Corner, including Mark Baker and his family. “He’s the one I’m helping with the grant. Of course, everyone you’ll want to see will come by the tavern, at some point.”

Bo, who had been raised on a farm in Illinois, understood the way small towns worked. “Sounds like the hub of Walkers Corner is the tavern, anyway,” he observed.

“It’s like the center of the universe, and everyone knows everyone else’s business,” Whitney interjected. “People ask the nosiest questions sometimes. Oh, and you won’t believe the characters who come into that bar.”

“They’re all wonderful people,” Carole Hannah said, chuckling as she defended her customers—although what Whitney said was true. “Their nosiness is more about being interested in each other, although there’s certainly more than enough gossip to go around.”

“The fewer people who live in a town, the more they pay attention to what everyone else is doing,” Bo said. “At least that’s the way it is in my hometown. The good part is, news travels fast, and you always know who you can trust.”

Randall Shelby’s face suddenly flashed into Carole Hannah’s mind,

and she thought about the preacher's increasingly aggressive tactics to encourage Sandy's attention. Suddenly she got goose bumps. *I've got to remember to tell Sandy that she needs to be careful around that guy and lock her doors.*

Turning up the heat in the car, she saw the road sign for Walkers Corner and told her hungry passengers, "We'll get some lunch first, and then we'll go home and see Florabelle and the new house."

When they arrived at the tavern, the kids were enthusiastically greeted by their grandparents, who insisted they order whatever they wanted from the menu. Bo ordered a double bacon cheeseburger and seasoned curly fries, while Whitney and Riley chose Cobb salads and iced teas. Carole Hannah went into the kitchen to help prepare their food since her mother was still busy.

A few minutes later, Holly flounced into the kitchen, looking as if her entire world was about to end.

"What's the matter?" Carole Hannah asked.

Holly gave her a stricken look. "Jake has to go south to work," she answered morosely. She fastened her hair into a ponytail, tied on an apron, and picked up her order pad.

Connie, who had already grown weary of the melodrama of new love, rolled her eyes at Carole Hannah. "Jake goes south every year when the weather gets cold here. Holly, if you'd paid any attention to him the past two years, you'd know that by now."

Turning to Carole Hannah, she said, "When it's winter here, Jake can't do much tree-carving, so he goes south. We all miss his cheerful, smiling face, but the man's got to make a living," she said, glancing impatiently in the direction of Holly, who sighed dramatically.

"I bet he'll be back to visit soon," Carole Hannah pointed out helpfully. "I mean, he does have a house here."

"Sometimes he's gone for weeks or even a couple of months at a time," Connie supplied. "Let's face it: there isn't a lot of work around here for a chainsaw artist. And Jake is actually quite well-known, from what we understand, even though he's too humble to tell anyone that. Last year, he spent the summer in Germany and someone made a documentary about him. Justine, his mom, was the one who told me."

"I didn't know he had family here," Carole Hannah said. "He

always seems like a loner. And I didn't know Justine had any kids. She graduated a year behind me in high school. Didn't her husband die?"

"Yes, her first husband died a long time ago—fell down a mine shaft, but she's remarried now to Judge Tommy McNamara. She's actually Jake's foster mom. After his parents were killed in a head-on with a coal truck along 56, she took him in."

After Holly went to the dining room to greet her cousins, Connie looked up from the salads and sandwiches she was assembling and shook her head. "Actually, I do feel sorry for Holly. This is all so new to her. Her life hasn't been easy since Evan was born, and I think she's really been lonely. She doesn't have the self-confidence to understand what it is that Jake sees in her, and she's convinced this separation is the beginning of the end of their relationship."

"I don't think so," Carole Hannah said, grinning. "Not judging by the way he looks at her. She's got no worries where he's concerned."

As Whitney and Riley excitedly greeted Holly, Bo introduced himself.

Tiny, petite Holly stared in awe at Bo, who towered over her. As she admired Whitney's one-and-a-half carat ambient diamond engagement ring, she said, "Wow, that's a real sparkler! You must be rich, Bo!"

Everyone laughed at Holly's blunt outburst as Bo replied with a straight face, "This girl is worth every penny."

"You have him so well-trained, too," Holly blurted out, and everyone laughed again. "Your food will be out in a few minutes," she said, blushing. "Bo, let me know if you want another beer."

Bo grinned. "That's just one of the great things about marrying into this family: unlimited beer."

After lunch, the reunion continued at Carole Hannah's house, where Florabelle acted as tour guide, scampering back and forth between Whitney, Riley, and Bo. She brought them all of her toys and herded them from room to room. While the girls unpacked their bags and settled in their upstairs bedroom, Florabelle jumped on Riley's bed (not allowed unless Carole Hannah wasn't looking).

"I've got to run over to the tavern for a while and help Grandma get things ready for Thanksgiving dinner," Carole Hannah called up the stairs. "You guys just relax, and I'll be back in time to make dinner. Does shrimp scampi over linguine with a Caesar salad sound good?"

"Yes!" all three hollered in unison from the first floor guestroom and office where Bo would sleep. Already, they were immersed in watching YouTube videos on Whitney's laptop.

Carole Hannah and Connie worked quickly to prepare two enormous turkeys, a large tray of cranberry-onion pork tenderloin, vats of herbed cornbread stuffing, sweet potatoes, green bean casserole, and other traditional Thanksgiving side dishes.

"Did Michael Baker and his family check in yet?" Carole Hannah asked Gil when he stepped into the kitchen to get lemon and lime wedges for the bar.

"A little while ago," he replied. "They're in the green room so the little one can sleep on the sofa bed. Michael seemed pretty surprised when he heard they'd be having Thanksgiving dinner here; not all that pleased, either, if you know what I mean." Gil cocked his head at Carole Hannah intently.

Connie overheard the conversation. "I'd say he looked downright grouchy while Mark was telling him the plans for dinner tomorrow. Michael's wife seems real nice, though, and the little girl is adorable."

"If you and Mark are going to become an item, you may have some issues with his son," Gil said in an offhand way. "Michael has always been a nice kid, but it's clear that this is a tough time. He may not yet have adjusted to holidays without his mother around, and he might not appreciate a new woman in his father's life."

"Oh, we are *so* not an item, Dad," Carole Hannah corrected him. "I'm helping Mark with a grant; that's all it is. We're not even that friendly."

Gil's eyes twinkled. "Something tells me that situation could change."

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On Thanksgiving morning, the weather took an unexpected turn, with a grey sky that threatened snow or, even worse, icy rain. Carole Hannah lit a cheery blaze in the fireplace before grinding beans for coffee and fixing waffles with scrambled eggs and thick center-cut bacon for Bo. Whitney and Riley, never early risers, took their time coming downstairs.



As they sat together at the kitchen table enjoying their coffee, he asked, "So, are you happy here? I mean is it everything you expected?"

"Yes to the first question and 'not sure' to the second," Carole Hannah answered honestly, taking a sip of her coffee. "In many ways, it's familiar and comfortable, but things can never be exactly as you remember, and it does take a while to adjust to life in such a small town. You can't get everything you need or want locally. I do most of my shopping on the internet these days."

She rose to add more wood to the fireplace. "A lot of my old girlfriends moved away, too, except for my oldest friend, Terry. But the things I love most—being with family and spending time near the creek are just the way I remember. I'm really busy at work and when I get home, I'm adding recipes to the cookbook, so there's no time to think about what else I might be missing. And now, this volunteer grant writing project is consuming more of my time than I'd like. But all of that will be over soon and I can get back to a normal life."

"Well, I sure am looking forward to checking out some of those new recipes," Bo said. "Is there any chance we can be official taste-testers?" He grinned playfully.

"I'm counting on all three of you to be the final judges of what recipes make it into the cookbook," she answered. "Whitney is a great cook, when she wants to be."

It was a leisurely holiday, and Carole Hannah relished a day off to sit by the fireplace, talk with her daughters and Bo, and enjoy an afternoon made-for-television movie. At four o'clock, they headed over to the tavern for dinner.

The dining room was already buzzing with activity. As they hung up their coats, she greeted Mark, who introduced her to his son, Michael; daughter-in-law, Kerri; and their four-year-old, Brittney. Evan had already challenged Brittney to a game of hide-and-seek. The children darted in and out of the dining room, shrieking and threatening to knock over small objects while Michael apologized for his daughter's behavior. He looked ill at ease as he stood in a corner, his posture stiff and off-putting.

"She's not causing any trouble," Gil assured him. "Those two are having a great time. Trust me; Evan is this bad all the time."

Carole Hannah found herself standing with Michael and Kerri as



Gil poured wine into glasses and passed them around. Before too long, Mark joined in their conversation.

"Carole Hannah and I have been working together to write a grant for the water cleanup project," he told Michael and Kerri. "She's a professional fundraiser."

Kerri smiled her encouragement. "It sounds like a lot of work to write a grant, and I wouldn't know the first thing about asking for money. And you're a chef here, too? You seem like such a well-rounded person."

"I'm just glad to be back here and glad that I can be helpful." She met Mark's eyes and knew that her cheeks were highly colored.

Michael remained stoically silent as she spoke.

"We're really happy to meet you," Kerri told her. She glanced meaningfully at her husband. "Aren't we?"

Michael's brow knitted as he looked away.

"It's been really enjoyable working with Carole Hannah. I wouldn't know what to do without her," Mark said, and a distinct shadow crossed his son's face.

"That's nice of you to say. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to help get dinner on the table," Carole Hannah said quickly, escaping into the kitchen, where Sandy was arranging floral bouquets for the buffet table.

"Here, let me help," Carole Hannah said, grateful for the diversion.

"Hiding out?" Sandy asked with a mischievous grin.

"Anything is better than trying to make small talk with someone who clearly wishes I'd disappear," Carole Hannah muttered.

"Yes, I noticed the air temperature is a few degrees cooler where Michael is standing," Sandy said. "What's eating him, anyway?"

"I'm pretty sure whatever it is, I play a huge role."

"You're not even sleeping with Mark yet." Sandy smiled wickedly. "Or are you?"

"Please stop," Carole Hannah replied, rolling her eyes.

She was careful to sit with Whitney, Riley, and Bo at one end of the dinner table, separated from Mark and his family by Reuben, Althea, and Holly. Evan and Brittney sat at a children's table in the corner, where they were within earshot and arm's reach of their parents.

She was grateful to see how easily Gil conversed with Michael, who visibly began to relax after two glasses of wine. True to form, Granny Nell managed to thoroughly disarm Michael by asking, "Weren't you the kid whose parents I had to call after you fell off your raft into the creek? You had four boards tied together with twine. Not the best raft builder, were you? But I guess you probably have other talents."

Michael chuckled. "I was ten, and you made me drink something that tasted worse than the creek water."

"It was supposed to make you throw up. I figured the cure was probably worse than the dirty water you swallowed, but at least you'd wise up and think twice about pulling a stunt like that again—or at least learn to build a better raft."

"Mother, there isn't a kid in town that didn't fall into that creek at least once. Most times, though, they escaped without being punished twice—having to take your tonic and then getting in trouble at home, too," Gil said mildly.

Several times during the meal, Carole Hannah was conscious that Mark was watching her. Twice, she averted her own eyes from his as a half-smile flickered across his face. Despite her strong sense that Mark was becoming more comfortable in her presence, he was all business whenever they worked together on the grant. Their conversations were pleasant, but mostly impersonal. He thanked her for her help, and she went directly home. She felt confused at the conflicting messages she received from him.

She caught her father's eye and received a sympathetic smile. *Of course, he knows what's going through my head.*

Later that evening, when they had gone back to the cottage, Whitney curled up on the yellow-and-blue floral sofa and wrapped a buttery-yellow afghan over her legs. "Dr. Baker seems nice. Is he divorced?"

"Widowed," Carole Hannah answered as Riley joined them on the sofa under the afghan. "His wife died last year from a heart attack. He's still having a hard time, and it's obvious that Michael is, too."

"I like him," Riley said. "He doesn't act like most science professors—all 'I know everything and you don't.' You can actually have a conversation with him. I mean, like, he gives you credit for having a brain."

"I think he's nice, too," Carole Hannah agreed and changed the subject, afraid that her children might guess just how much she liked

Mark. "Anybody have room for hot chocolate and Christmas cookies? I made your favorites."

"The double-chocolate chip kind, I hope?" Riley asked, eyes sparkling. When her mother nodded, she bounced off the sofa. "And brown sugar cookies with sprinkles?"

"You know I always make those," Carole Hannah answered indulgently. "Just because we're here this year, rather than in Kansas, doesn't mean anything important has to change."

The doorbell rang, and Florabelle woofed twice as Carole Hannah rose to answer the door. Tony stood on the porch, holding a huge floral arrangement made of fresh, fragrant greens with a profusion of autumn flowers. His cheeks were rosy, whether from the cold or embarrassment, it was hard to tell. He handed the arrangement to Carole Hannah while he shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"My goodness, they've lovely, Tony. Thank you so much! Please come in."

"I thought I'd bring a holiday arrangement for your dinner table. Sorry, but I couldn't get away to bring it over earlier." He looked anxious and embarrassed.

Carole Hannah understood instantly that Carla didn't know his whereabouts and that Tony had probably slipped away from a large family gathering.

"Take off your jacket and stay a while," she said quickly. "We're about to have hot chocolate and some premature Christmas cookies."

She shrugged and exchanged glances with her daughters, not sure what else to say.

Tony remained awkwardly by the fireplace while she introduced him to Bo. "I'm sure you remember Whitney and Riley."

They looked curiously at Tony.

"Hi, girls; it's nice to see you again. Congratulations, Bo."

Tony looked intently at Carole Hannah. "I can't stay. I just wanted to make sure you had something nice for your holiday table."

"It's very pretty," she said, coloring slightly. "Thanks again."

"Enjoy your time with your mom," he told the kids as he retreated to the door. "Cee, I'll catch you later."

"Happy Thanksgiving," she said and watched him walk to his

vehicle, turn to wave, and disappear inside. She shut the front door and leaned back against it.

"Whoa, Mom," Whitney and Riley said in unison. "What was *that* about?"

"Just an old friend from high school, that's all."

"That was your old boyfriend, Mom," Whitney said pointedly. "I remember his name and that he always came to visit at Grandma's house when we were there. Does he still have the hots for you?"

Carole Hannah laughed. "Well, he certainly likes me," she replied as innocently as she could manage. "We're still good friends. By the way, Tony is engaged to a woman named Carla."

"Whatever, Mom," Riley said with a sweetly sarcastic laugh. "Men don't bring flowers to women other than their fiancées for no reason, do they, Bo?"

Bo put on his best poker face. "No, they most certainly do not!" He glanced over at Whitney. "I would never do such a thing."

Whitney laughed and punched Bo in the arm.

"Actually, he's pretty cute for an older guy, Mom," Riley said. "Maybe he just wanted to see how you'd react to the flowers. You were pretty cool about it. Good job."

"Did you say older guy? Ouch. For your information, Tony and I are exactly the same age."

"You know what I mean," Riley said. "He's good-looking for someone who isn't, you know, that young anymore. So are you, good-looking, I mean," she continued, and trailed off as Whitney and Bo laughed even harder.

"Let's just agree that I still have a few more good years in me," Carole Hannah said dryly. "Now eat up those cookies. We're getting up early tomorrow to find a Christmas tree."

Whitney looked concerned. "Are we going to go out into the woods and cut one down? I forgot to bring boots or any old shoes." In fact, Whitney Lawson possessed no old or sensible shoes.

"Indiana County is famous for Christmas trees," Carole Hannah told her. "We'll just go to a farm up the road and buy one that's already been cut. No actual work involved."

The tree they selected the next day put every other tree in their holiday history to shame. Lush and green with soft needles on its large

boughs, it smelled exquisitely of pine and the outdoors. Carole Hannah and Bo gently settled it into a stand and arranged a red tartan tree skirt around its base. The girls gleefully pulled out one favorite ornament after another from the boxes containing Christmas memories from their childhoods. Bo strung white twinkle lights and then sat down with a *Sports Illustrated* while the girls finished decorating the tree. Carole Hannah put on some soft Christmas music, hung stockings on the fireplace mantel, and arranged gaily wrapped packages under the tree.

After a dinner of eggplant lasagna and salad, they opened their gifts. Carole Hannah was deeply touched to find a copy of cookbook software from her daughters.

"We thought this might make your work on the cookbook easier and more fun. You can use it to design your own art for each recipe," Whitney explained.

"It's perfect," Carole Hannah said. Tears glistened in her eyes. "But the best part of this gift is that you're here to give it to me in person."



## **Carole Hannah's Holiday Orange-Dijon Turkey Breast**

3 lb. boneless turkey breast filet  
2/3 cup orange juice  
3 tbsp. spicy Dijon mustard  
1/4 cup (1/2 stick) unsalted butter  
3 cloves garlic, minced  
4 tsp. dried rosemary

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. In a small saucepan, melt butter or margarine. Add mustard, and stir. Add orange juice, garlic, and rosemary to butter-mustard mixture, then remove from heat and allow flavors to blend for one hour. If necessary, re-warm mixture before brushing over turkey.

Place turkey breast filet in a roasting pan and brush all of the orange-Dijon mixture over turkey. Cover and roast for one hour. Lower oven temperature to 325 degrees and continue baking another 20 to 30 minutes. Do not allow turkey marinade to evaporate. Add more orange juice, if necessary. Uncover turkey and bake another 30 minutes.

## Chapter 14

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JERRY MACDONALD MISTED COLOGNE THROUGH THE air above her head and stepped into it, inhaling the delicate floral scent as it drifted onto her dark curls and over her bare shoulders. She wore black leather pants that hugged her shapely legs and a black off-the-shoulder sweater. She touched the silver Celtic cross about her throat and donned matching earrings, the only other jewelry she ever wore. Pulling on her favorite knee-high black suede boots, she peered critically at her carefully made-up face as she prepared to join her band members for their regular Saturday night gig at the Creekside Tavern. It would take just minutes to get there. Her home in a wooded area near the edge of town was just four miles from the tavern.

No doubt, Richie, her drummer, had hooked up the sound system by now while Ben was meticulously tuning his bass guitar. Phil, her keyboard player and male soloist, would be running through a few songs, helping Ben and laughing. Ben and Phil were always laughing about something. Victoria, the band's fiddle player, would be talking on her cell phone to her youngest daughter.

Terry sauntered into the bar fifteen minutes later and quickly reviewed songs for both sets with the members of the band. She placed a sheet of paper with the lineup of songs on the floor in front of the microphone, where she could read it easily, and then ordered a glass of hot water with lemon and honey.

As usual, all available tables and booths were full, and there was standing room only at the bar. She had to hand it to Gil; he had always

known how to market the tavern to its best advantage. Most people wouldn't dream of going anywhere else for live music on Saturday nights. As she surveyed the familiar crowd, Terry was blissfully conscious of being in her element. Performing was what she was born to do, and nothing made her happier. She smiled and waved at several customers before adjusting the microphone.

"We'd like to start out this evening with an Irish ballad I arranged last year to take advantage of our talented fiddle player," she said and stepped back as Victoria moved into position just behind Terry to her right. Victoria smiled and bowed slightly at the waist as Phil began the keyboard introduction.

All eyes gravitated to Victoria, who stood motionless for a moment before smiling and tossing her waist-length hair in a signature motion. She held the fiddle outstretched before tucking it under her chin, where it seemed to become part of her anatomy. She was gorgeous, the glossy-black hair swinging with every movement of her bow. Although she was happily married to a dentist and the mother of three adolescents, that didn't stop scores of men from following the band, hoping for a chance to get to know her better. Terry didn't mind sharing the spotlight with Victoria, who had always been a big draw. The bigger the crowds, the more gigs the band was invited to play.

Members of Street were close friends who had played together for nearly three years. For the most part, there were no ego issues as everyone worked together to produce the best music possible. They played regularly around a four-county region, and had just produced their first CD, *Street Where You Live*.

When she was in her mid-twenties, Terry married Royce White, a handsome saxophone player with amazing songwriting talents. He discovered her singing at a summer church festival at Doe Run Presbyterian Church and invited her to be female vocalist in his band. After an eight-year relationship—that, if not exactly filled with all-consuming passion, was at least companionable—Terry convinced Royce they should marry. His reaction was mostly positive, but marriage did nothing to deepen their connection, as she'd hoped. For nearly five years, it seemed an ideal life to be married to one of her best friends and to perform together. It was only after Terry learned that Royce was

sleeping with the keyboard player, whose name was Frank, that the marriage hit the skids. Terry and Royce separated immediately.

In her desperation to get as far away from Royce as possible, Terry joined a country band that kept her on the road and away from Walkers Corner. She sang backup and dodged the inappropriate advances of the alcoholic lead singer until she could barely stand to perform with him anymore. After a year, she finally summoned enough courage to start her own band, which she called Street, after the first song she'd ever written. She was thankful that she had enough regular gigs, coupled with offering vocal lessons and directing the church choir, to make a decent living. It was also a good thing, she realized, that Royce had never been interested in having children.

After such an astonishing betrayal and blow to her feminine ego, Terry's dating preferences leaned toward tall, big-boned men working in traditionally masculine career fields such as construction, mining, or heavy machinery. She looked for early clues to their masculinity and slept with them fast, remembering that Royce had never been enthusiastic about sex. There was only one way to tell if a man was heterosexual, she believed: how quickly he initiated sex. Embarrassed because everyone in Walkers Corner knew about Royce, she dated in nearby communities away from the curious eyes of family, friends, and neighbors. Unfortunately, the speed at which Terry fell into bed with a guy was directly linked to how quickly he stopped calling.

As she hit her mid-forties, Terry gave up on finding a mate. She made suggestive jokes with girlfriends about her bawdy sex life, but in reality, Terry had been alone and celibate for nearly four years. She poured her considerable passion into her songs, believing that the romantic years of her life were over. It finally occurred to her that Sandy Sherard was probably right when she said serious artists needed to be prepared to live alone if they wanted to do their best work.

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The next several weeks were a blur for Carole Hannah as she worked extra shifts at the tavern, a favorite location for holiday parties. Now that the new rooms at the inn were finally renovated and decorated, they were fully booked through the holiday season with out-of-town relatives of local families. The inn was clearly the nicest place around, and the

quality of food and drink at the Creekside Tavern allowed it to be listed at four stars on hospitality websites. As the new rooms increased the inn's bookings in December, Gil told Carole Hannah that she should hire and train another part-time cook to handle guest breakfasts.

"I don't want your mother here so early in the morning anymore," he insisted firmly. "It's time for her to sleep in a little later, like I do."

Meanwhile, Carole Hannah and Mark worked feverishly to complete the grant to the Community Foundation by the third week in December, just three days away. It also happened to be one of the busiest weeks at the tavern, and as much as she hated to ask, Carole Hannah knew she didn't have time to fulfill her grant writing responsibilities without some give-and-take from Mark. He brought his laptop to the tavern so that she didn't have to drive back and forth to the university. She set him up at a table in the back near the kitchen, provided him with a fresh carafe of coffee and a plate of sandwiches, and told him to do as much as he could on the budget and its narrative. She would review and edit later, she promised, as she hurried back to the kitchen. If Mark minded, he certainly didn't show it. Instead, he faithfully e-mailed her every morning to let her know how much he appreciated her help, especially during such a hectic time at the tavern.

When she finally got home late at night, Carole Hannah curled up on the sofa with her laptop, Florabelle parked right beside her. The old dog put her head as close to the keyboard as possible, nosing Carole Hannah's fingers so that it seemed every message included canine thoughts, as well.

The doggie door in the basement allowed Florabelle to go in and out of the house anytime she wanted, but in reality, she was a couch potato. Having been abused and abandoned before Carole Hannah adopted her from a shelter, Florabelle seemed grateful for a quiet, safe place to live. She no longer hoarded food or immediately devoured everything in her bowl, having learned that life with Carole Hannah meant there was always plenty of food and clean water.

"Sorry to be gone so much, little girl," Carole Hannah murmured gently as she kissed the top of the dog's head and stroked her soft fur. "Mama has to earn a living so you can have all the treats you want and sleep on our sofa all day."



To: EllenH

From: CookOntheGo

Subject: This and That

*Thank you for the beautiful Christmas card! I haven't had a minute to address or send any of mine yet, since I've started making soup jars again. Everyone seems to like them so much. Last year, I made chicken noodle soup, which was a big hit. This year, it's a healthy brown rice, lentil, and barley mixture that looks almost like sand art. Yours is on its way, I promise.*

*The grant proposal is finally finished and submitted, but I haven't seen or heard from Mark since then. I guess his only interest was the project. I feel so used. Sniff! ☺*

*Tony and Carla sat behind me in church last Sunday. When it was time to offer the sign of peace, it was anything but peaceful. Carla shoved her hand into mine and literally body-blocked Tony from coming near me. It would have been funny, if it weren't so pathetic. She's desperate to hang onto him, but something tells me he isn't going anywhere.*

*Somewhere along the way, Tony became so...needy. Or is just another case of me completely missing a man's true nature until the reality hits me upside the head? Granny Nell always says I see the best in people, and that's a good thing, but when it comes to potential mates, she wants me to start seeing "the actuals." As usual, she's right. I remember saying that to Whitney and Riley, when they started dating, but I didn't follow my own advice.*

*Tell everyone at the office hello for me. If you get a chance to grab some vacation, there's always room for you at my house or at the inn. I'd suggest, however, that you come after the deep freeze is over.*

*Love, Cee*

As Christmas week approached, Carole Hannah fretted that she hadn't seen Mark at all since the grant was submitted. He hadn't come by the tavern for dinner or even for a beer after work. She expected to receive at least an e-mail, but Mark seemed to detach from her completely. She e-mailed him once and after not receiving a reply, decided to let the matter drop.

With Mark seemingly not interested, and Tony behaving admirably under Carla's watchful eye, Carole Hannah felt something that felt suspiciously like the blues. Although she was surprised at how much she enjoyed her time alone, she thought it might be nice to have a special man in her life for companionship, if nothing more. She saw Tony at church each Sunday, but the only contact they had now was a smiling two-fingered sign of peace as Carla solidly arranged herself between them.

Carole Hannah had been feeling sorry for herself all day as she prepared to spend the Christmas holiday alone, without Whitney and Riley. Every other year, they celebrated Christmas with their dad and his family, and that was the case this year. As she fingered all their favorite tree ornaments, she felt so low that she decided to get out of the house and away from the silent phone and the noise of her own thoughts. Besides, she missed Granny Nell and knew that Gran would know just what to say to comfort and encourage her. No one had seen Gran for several days during this cold snap. Living so far out on the trail, it wasn't easy for her to get into town. To make matters worse, she often chose not to answer her phone.

Carole Hannah drove to the gravel parking lot at the start of the trail and parked, then walked the half-mile to Gran's bungalow. She could have driven directly to the house by the back road, but the lure of walking along the silent, frosty trail was too powerful. The air smelled of wood smoke as she approached Gran's house.

"Yoo-hoo," she called as she pushed open the front door. The smell of cinnamon and sugar wafted through the air inside the entryway, and Carole Hannah found her grandmother in the kitchen rolling out cookie dough. The kitchen windows were fogged up, and Gran was up to her elbows in flour as she cut out her traditional sugar cookies. Tendrils of white hair fell becomingly over Nell's forehead and cheeks.

Carole Hannah snatched a golden-brown star from the cooling racks and munched. "Mm, Gran. Your cookies always taste the best."

"That's because I put rose water in the dough," Gran said. "Can you taste it?"

"Is that your secret? Why, yes, I do taste rosewater. So that's what makes them so good."

"Yet another use for those special roses your Grandpa Joe cross-pollinated for me," Gran observed as she lined up more stars on a cookie sheet. "He named them for his mother, Mary Edna. I never much liked that name for them, but they sure smell good. And while I'm on that subject, there's a half-ounce vial of rose oil on the counter over there. It's for you."

"For me?" Carole Hannah retrieved the vial and opened it, taking an appreciative sniff.

"I think you can find a good use for it. Inhale deeply a few times and then do your meditation," she said.

"I know what this is for," Carole Hannah said. "It's the aroma of love. But I'm not in love, Gran, at least not yet."

"True love often comes in baby steps, dear," Nell said. "Sometimes we are further than we think without even being aware of how we got there."

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Four days before Christmas, Carole Hannah came home from the tavern and prepared the last batch of soup jars, the attractive and practical gifts she gave to friends and neighbors. She had already made one for Mark, despite not having seen or heard from him in nearly two weeks.

"I guess that tells me everything I need to know about how he feels about me," she muttered to herself as she layered brown rice, lentils, split peas, barley, and herbs into quart-size jars. Topping off each soup jar with its final ingredient, she cut nine-inch swatches of colorful holiday fabric and inserted a fabric square between the lid and its ring; then wrapped the ring with raffia and red-and-green braided ribbons. Each jar came with a colorful recipe card explaining what other ingredients should be added to make the soup.

She had no idea that outside her home, a dejected Tony sat in his

truck along the road and watched her through the dining room window. He longed to go to the door and tell her he still loved her. He was even willing to promise to leave Carla eventually, if only Carole Hannah would assure him of her feelings in return and promise she would wait for him.

With a sigh, he put the vehicle into drive and headed home, where Carla had a plate of meatloaf and mashed potatoes, his favorite meal, waiting for him.

## Carole Hannah's Rainbow Soup Mix in a Jar

1 cup barley  
1/2 cup dried split green peas  
1/2 cup red lentils  
1 cup uncooked brown rice  
3/4 cup brown lentils  
2 tbsp. dried parsley  
1 bay leaf  
2 tsp. granulated or powdered garlic  
1 tsp. black pepper  
2 tsp. sea salt  
1 tsp. garlic powder  
1 tsp. dried basil  
1 tsp. dried oregano  
1 tsp. dried thyme  
2 tsp. dried sage

Layer ingredients in the order given into a one-quart canning jar. Pack each layer down with a spoon before adding the next ingredient.

Attach a gift tag with the following instructions:

1 jar of soup mix  
1 medium onion, diced  
1 28-oz. can diced tomatoes with juice

Place soup mix in a large soup pot. Add 20 cups of water. Add onion and diced tomatoes. Bring to a boil. Cover, lower heat, and simmer 1 hour, stirring occasionally. Check after 30 minutes and add additional water, if needed.



## Chapter 15

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JANUARY AND FEBRUARY FOUND WALKERS CORNER in a deep freeze with patches of black ice scattered on the macadam roads and nearly fifteen inches of snow on the frozen ground. Deer ventured onto Carole Hannah's property, digging for roots and gnawing on bushes and low tree branches in their search for food. She was vigilant about keeping black sunflower seeds in the feeder for winter birds, but couldn't do much more than feel sympathy for the deer.

Temperatures this time of year ranged from the high-twenties to mid-thirties with a much lower wind chill factor. With ice that was inches thick on the water, there was little sign of life on Doe Run, aside from the occasional brave figure skater or intrepid hockey player. But on the trail, cross-country skiers and snowshoe enthusiasts could be seen just about any hour of the day and night, headlamps glowing as they shushed their way across the glistening snow.

Carole Hannah was glad for the regular hours at work that forced her to leave her cozy cottage every day. Otherwise, she was certain she'd have become a hermit. Each evening, she gratefully headed home to her nest, lit a roaring fire in the fireplace, and curled up with her laptop or a good book. She was making fast progress on the cookbook, which now included sections for breakfast, appetizers, salads, soups, entrees, and desserts.

One late afternoon during February, as Carole Hannah tended bar, she was surprised to look up from the pilsner glasses she was washing to find Mark Baker perched on one of the barstools.

"Hello, stranger," Carole Hannah said, placing a coaster in front of him. "What can I get for you?"

"How about a Blue Moon?" he asked, watching her closely.

Carole Hannah retrieved a bottle from the refrigerator and garnished a pint-size glass with a wedge of orange before handing it to him. She placed a menu in front of him and then turned away to serve another customer as Mark sipped his beer, looking thoughtfully at her from time to time.

"Have you heard anything about the grant yet?" Carole Hannah asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Actually, that's one of the reasons I came by. I got a letter from the community foundation saying the proposal made it to the second round of consideration. We should hear something by early April. I thought you'd want to know right away."

"That's wonderful, Mark," Carole Hannah said more formally as she rang up another sale. "I appreciate that you took time out of your busy schedule to let me know." She was careful not to look at him as she spoke. "There's still another foundation that would consider this type of grant, and since the proposal is already written for the community foundation, it'd be an easy matter to submit the same info to them."

Mark paused, studying her, a puzzled look on his face. "That's the second reason I came by," he said. "I'd like to get more aggressive about fundraising to achieve that challenge match earlier than later. I'd rather say, 'All the money's in hand.' But I haven't had time lately to get immersed in the process or ask for your help. I was out of town from the time the students left on semester break until about two weeks ago, and then the new semester started and things got crazy."

"I wondered why I didn't hear from you," she said coolly. "I thought maybe I'd made a mistake."

"Not at all," Mark interrupted, his eyes opening in surprise. He combed his beard with his fingers, looking distressed. "I'm sorry you thought that. I'm afraid I don't have a good excuse for my behavior or, should I say, my bad manners." He paused. "Or at least, I'm unprepared to tell you, at this moment, why I took off without saying a word. Believe me, you did nothing wrong."

"You don't have to explain anything to me." Carole Hannah began setting out bar snacks, sliding a bowl of ranch-seasoned pretzel nuggets

in front of him. "After all, we were just working together on a project, and you're certainly free to come and go without feeling like it's any of my business. I guess I'm just falling into the whole small town thing: if someone disappears for a while, their absence is noticed."

Mark looked directly into her eyes. "I'm glad you noticed."

By now, the bar had gotten more crowded, and Carole Hannah began pouring drinks and taking food orders.

"I have to get going," Mark said, counting out bills. "Maybe I could call you later and we can talk more about the project. I really do need your help. I'm betting you know a much better way to get this whole fundraising effort accomplished in the least amount of time. The sooner we have the money in hand, the faster we can get the project under way."

"Actually, I was thinking that a formal presentation could be made to the full membership of the canoe club and the civic council to discuss a fundraising campaign," Carole Hannah said thoughtfully. "Everything we need for the meeting is right there in the proposal. We could talk about the challenge grant concept to the entire membership, not just to their executive committees, as you've already done. We need everyone who cares about Doe Run to understand why their own support is so important before we look outside the community. Why should anyone else outside our community give if the stakeholders of the project here haven't given yet?"

"True." Mark took the last swallow of his beer and stood up.

She rang up his drink ticket. "Besides," she continued, "this is an important project, and I think a lot of people will want to give. We can offer pledge opportunities, too, if Laurel Woods Bank will agree to give us a line of credit. Then we can figure out whether there are other people, foundations, or companies that might be likely targets for formal requests. We need to ask for volunteers to help solicit gifts, too. My dad will help."

Mark's eyes softened. "Thank you," he said. "You've made this process much easier. I'll call you tomorrow after my night class, if that's okay."

"That'd be nice," she said and watched him leave. He held the door open for Randall Shelby, who came in stamping snow off his boots.

Carole Hannah could barely hide her dislike of Randall as he swung

himself up onto one of the barstools. It occurred to her that he might have been passably attractive were it not for the perpetual scowl on his face. He was dressed, as usual, in a starched white shirt and red tie. His pig-small eyes bored into her as she handed him a menu, set a cloth napkin and utensils in front of him, and asked for his drink order.

"Hello, Carole Hannah," Randall said pointedly.

She realized that she hadn't bothered to greet him. "Good evening, Randy," she replied in as measured a tone as possible; then took his dinner order for pigs in a blanket and mashed potatoes.

"Is your sister working tonight? I've missed seeing her."

Carole Hannah felt bile rise in her throat. "No, she's been extra busy lately with painting and her art classes, so we're cutting her some slack on her hours."

"Painting and art classes," he said, thoughtfully stroking his five o'clock shadow. "I can't understand how someone can be an artist and not want for anything more meaningful in her life—children and a husband, for instance. It doesn't seem natural."

"It's perfectly natural for a woman to have a career, and Sandy has a family that thinks it's just fine for her to do as she pleases."

She took in a deep breath, realizing that she'd just snapped at a customer, and endeavored now to keep her tone more neutral. There was something in his expression that caused her anxiety to increase. She'd already warned Sandy about Randall, but Sandy laughed off the suggestion that she watch out for him, especially leaving the tavern at night.

"I think I can handle Randy if he gets too frisky," she said, squeezing her sister's arm reassuringly. "Don't worry."

Carole Hannah remained unconvinced.

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After her shift at the tavern ended at seven o'clock, Holly picked up Evan from her parents' house and brought him back to their modest apartment located on the second floor above the hardware store. The apartment had a small galley kitchen, living room, tiny bathroom, and two bedrooms that she had furnished with hand-me-downs from her parents and grandparents. The bigger bedroom was Evan's since he



needed space for his ever-growing collection of toys and books. The apartment was spotless, a testament to her upbringing by Althea.

She had rented this place after six years of living with Evan at her parents' house, sharing her childhood room with him. For years, she wanted to move out, but needed help with childcare while she saved enough for a financial cushion. She dreaded telling her parents the news, knowing that her past behavior hadn't given them confidence in her ability to be a competent adult. But that had been almost seven years ago. Since then, she had been thrifty with her paychecks and saved dutifully for her and Evan's future, even putting a little money away each month for a college fund. When she announced to her parents that she'd be moving into her own apartment soon, the news hadn't been met entirely with favor.

Reuben looked up from the sermon he was writing and frowned. "How can I possibly approve of this when it's clear that you continue to need help from us with Evan? How can you even afford your own apartment?"

"Dad, I've been saving for the deposit, and I have a budget and some money in savings. It's true that I still need Mom's help with Evan, and I'd appreciate it a lot if he could still be here in the afternoons while I work."

"I can hardly believe that this is the best thing for Evan." Reuben removed his glasses and turned to face her, his expression a mixture of disapproval and disgust.

Hot tears sprung to Holly's eyes. "Dad, he's my little boy, and I'm doing what's best for us. I want to be independent, and please believe me that I've thought this through and planned for it for a long time."

"I hope we won't need to move you back home and finish paying out a lease," he said.

"No, Dad. I wouldn't ever ask that of you." Her face colored with shame, and she had to look away quickly to stop the tears that threatened to spill over at the unfairness of his comment.

"Well then, I guess there's nothing I can do to dissuade you. You're twenty-four years old, and you're certainly of legal age to make your own decisions, be they right or wrong. I do expect, however, that you'll have Evan in Sunday School, and that you'll take care not to have late-



night guests at your apartment when he's there. I trust you've learned that lesson."

Although she felt this was an unreasonable comment given the fact that she would be the one paying the rent, she held her tongue. At that time, there was no one in her life, anyway.

Although Althea tried not to meddle in her decisions where Evan was concerned, Holly knew that her father's opinion was unlikely to change. He still viewed her as an irresponsible child likely to get into more trouble without parental supervision.

"Your mother is concerned about Evan's ear infection," Reuben said one evening just before they moved to the new apartment. "Make sure you don't forget to give him his medicine when you don't live here anymore."

"I've got it under control," Holly answered a bit more sharply than she intended. She took a deep breath and counted to ten.

Reuben looked at her, and his gaze narrowed. "I know you think I'm nagging you, but we only want what's best for Evan. We're just trying to give you the benefit of our experience."

"I know that. But I've never forgotten to give him his medicine. I wish you could trust that I'm a good mom."

Reuben raised his eyebrows. "I don't think you understand how difficult it is to want the best for your children."

"Yes, Dad, I do."

Although Reuben didn't approve, Althea seemed to understand Holly's wish for independence.

"You want to make your own home for Evan. I'm proud of you," she said as she quickly scouted out extra kitchen and bath items to help Holly set up housekeeping. Holly was grateful for her mother's help, since her paycheck barely covered necessities, even with decent tips. Now that she was on her own, she felt a sense of accomplishment and pride that came from being an adult caring for her son in her own place.

After she bathed Evan and helped him on with his Spider Man pajamas, she read *Goodnight, Moon*, his favorite book, and fixed him a bowl of Cheerios. The fortunate part about raising Evan, she thought, as she kissed his forehead and tucked him into bed, was that the pace

of his high-energy daily activities meant he was happy to be in bed by eight thirty and that he slept through the night.

"Night, Mommy," Evan said, when she turned off his bedside lamp and clicked on the baseball nightlight. "I love you," he said, yawning as she tucked his Elmo monster doll under the blanket.

"Good night, sweet boy," Holly said. "I love you more than anyone in the world."

"Even Jake?"

Holly flinched. She hadn't seen Jake since mid-December, although he called occasionally and sent postcards. They exchanged e-mails and a few instant messages, but sometimes she didn't hear from him for days. Jake explained that he often worked in remote areas where cell phone and internet service were practically nonexistent, and he often slept in his truck, rather than incur hotel expenses.

"Jake is my special friend, but you're my only son. You're my favorite boy for always," Holly answered. "Now, sleep tight. Don't let the bedbugs bite."

"Thee you in the morning light," Evan parroted and rolled over onto his side. Within a few minutes, his steady breathing told Holly that he was sound asleep.

She unfastened her shoulder-length blonde hair from the ponytail she always wore at work, and brushed her hair until it shone. Peering at her face critically in the mirror, she brushed her teeth before applying the rose-scented night cream Granny Nell insisted all the Sherard women use. Then she put on her favorite Pittsburgh Steelers nightshirt and padded out to the living room in her bare feet. Switching on the computer, she waited while the cable hummed and connected to the internet. Maybe there was an e-mail from Jake tonight. He hadn't sent her anything in days.

But there was no e-mail from him again this evening. Holly felt disappointed tears well up in her eyes and drip down her cheeks onto her bare knees. He probably had another girlfriend by now, someone who was prettier and smarter and a whole lot more interesting. He probably met lots of other women who didn't have small children. How could he be happy with someone like her, someone who had no real skills in life except waiting tables? *I should have taken Mom's and Dad's advice and*

*gone to the community college or at least to secretarial school.* The thought of Jake with another woman made her feel physically ill.

True, he was wonderful with Evan and genuinely seemed to enjoy playing with him. But Jake and Holly hardly got any time alone together, unless Holly was able to leave Evan with her mother and father. It certainly wasn't okay to leave him overnight at their house, unless she stayed there, too. Her father had made it clear that when Evan was there late at night, he needed to sleep in the youth bed in their old room, and Holly was expected to be there to greet him in the morning. Jake reassured her that he understood and promised to call the next day, and he always did.

Althea was supportive of Holly and Jake's relationship and always willing to care for Evan. She knew only too well, however, that she walked a fine line. Fully conscious of how her husband felt, it wasn't a good idea for the sake of their own relationship if she engaged Reuben in matters of Holly's privacy or suggested that Holly and Jake needed more time alone. The time had come now, she thought, to start taking a stand.

"Holly's a good and loving mother," she told Reuben firmly as she set his dinner plate in front of him. "Let the past go and see her for who she is now."

Somewhere, somehow, she thought, her girl deserved a break.

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Curled up in her bed, Holly took a deep breath and dabbed with a handful of tissues at the tears that continued to flow as she said her prayers. *Please, God, bring Jake home soon.*

It was all going to be okay, she told herself bravely. She'd been alone with Evan for six years, and their life together was just fine. Besides, when you have a child, she thought, that child is your whole world.

## Connie's Kielbasa and Sauerkraut

2 lbs. smoked kielbasa  
2 large cans sauerkraut  
2 onions, quartered  
1/4 pound smoked bacon, sliced  
2 tbsp. flour  
2 tbsp. bacon fat  
Freshly ground black pepper to taste

In a large pan, cover kielbasa with water and bake in a 325 degree oven for 1 hour. Rinse and dry the sauerkraut and spoon it into the kielbasa pan. Add the onions and smoked bacon, stirring to distribute the bacon slices. Add more water to cover and simmer for 45 minutes. When kielbasa is cooked, remove the meat from the pan and slice it into 4-inch pieces. Add kielbasa pieces back to the sauerkraut mixture and continue cooking for 30 minutes.

In a skillet, heat bacon fat, and add the flour to the fat, stirring until flour is golden brown. Add flour mixture to the kielbasa and sauerkraut, and mix thoroughly. Remove onions.

Serve kielbasa and sauerkraut over mashed potatoes with a few spoonfuls of the pan juices.

## Chapter 16

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JAKE CAMPBELL MADE HIS LIVING AS a chainsaw artist, carving tree stumps into every imaginable type of mammal, bird, fish, or flower. When inspiration struck, he thought about how the finished product would feel beneath his fingers as he made the first cut, and envisioned each stroke necessary to bring forth the creative vision in his mind. Under Jake's skillful hands, delicate flowers, winged birds, bears with their cubs, dolphins, and proud deer were sculpted cut by cut, precisely carved, and then sanded to smooth perfection.

He loved the smell of sawdust when he cut into a dead tree, bringing it to a new form of life. Many people grew attached to the trees on their properties, he knew, and grieved when a tree became diseased, died, or was hit by lightning. They often knew exactly what they wanted that tree to become in its second life. While he worked, Jake drew crowds of people fascinated by the intricate detail he was able to coax from a large stump. Eagles, flowers, butterflies, fawns, fairies, and other creatures appeared magically as he wielded his chain saw with the lightest touch. Delicate feathers emerged from an eagle's wingtips while he weaved in and out with his saw blade.

Jake loved interacting with the children who inevitably congregated as close as they could get without putting themselves at risk.

"Heads up!" he'd exclaim in a warning voice before surprising the children by throwing Tootsie Rolls their way. As a result, Jake became well-known for his performance art and was always in demand at festivals and state fairs.



It didn't hurt his appeal, either, that he was undeniably handsome with a well-developed upper body from the considerable effort it took to handle a chainsaw for hours at a time, day after day. Although the work left him exhausted, it was what he loved doing most. Whenever he wasn't carving trees into sculptures, he created smaller figurines in the studio behind his cabin. The miniature animals, birds, and dolphins sold out quickly at fairs and gift shops. In addition to sculptures, Jake also made rustic furniture: art-carved bed and sofa frames, bentwood rocking chairs, tables, benches, even porch swings. At first, he was unsure of how much to charge for his work. Within a few years, though, after everything he built sold quickly, he realized he could charge a handsome price for his designs.

When Jake was just sixteen, his parents were killed in a head-on car accident, the result of a coal truck that crossed the center line on a hairpin road. Without other family members willing or able to take him into their homes, Jake was on his own. After school, he worked at a local Sheetz convenience store, managing to avoid discovery (and foster care) by telling anyone who asked that he stayed with an uncle who worked in a neighboring county. It took nearly four months for the high school principal to catch on that there was no uncle and to realize with dismay that Jake Campbell lived in his old car and showered in the boys' locker room when gym classes weren't in session. Regretfully, the principal was required to report Jake as a minor without a guardian.

"You're a great kid. I'm sorry about this," the principal said in a voice husky with emotion at the quiet dignity on the boy's face. With Jake's small stature, the principal feared the worst in the social service system.

Jake was assigned to a county juvenile group home, where he finished school in a special program for delinquent teenage boys and those non-delinquents who hadn't yet been assigned to foster care homes. Many of the boys had aggressive tendencies, preferring to fight rather than talk out their disagreements. Since Jake was at least a head shorter than most boys his age, he learned quickly how to defend his turf in the dorm room he shared with four others. He kept to himself, spending most of his free time in the home's small reading room, where he brought books from the school library. He excelled at his studies, especially geography, and read everything he could about the world outside his vista.

His high school English teacher, Justine Harvey, found Jake to be an avid reader with a curious mind and an exceptionally sweet spirit. She took him under her wing, suggesting books she thought he would enjoy, and within a few months got permission to be his foster mother.

"Would you like to live at my house?" she asked Jake, gently laying a soft manicured hand on his shoulder. Jake, who couldn't imagine anything he wanted more, thought of Mrs. Harvey as an angel in her cashmere twinsets and skirts, her floral perfume reminiscent of his mother's.

Justine was a young widow whose husband had been killed when he fell into an abandoned mine shaft while riding his mountain bike. She adored her teaching job and, without children of her own, had plenty of extra love and attention to offer Jake. Justine channeled her considerable domestic energies into keeping a spotless home, cooking, and baking. She made sure Jake had a hot breakfast and dinner, and always provided him with a lavish sack lunch.

Jake flourished in Justine's care and was able, with her help, to attend the regional vocational school, where his long-time fascination with trees and innate artistic ability made him a natural for specialized carpentry. After two years of trade school, Jake enrolled as an apprentice in the local carpenters' union, where he perfected his skills in construction and wood-working. He was a quick study and paid close attention to the master carpenters as they built sturdy frames, constructed cabinetry, and raised buildings. He longed to use his own creative ideas and eventually went to work for a business that made small residential buildings in the shape of miniature barns or houses, along with popular bent wood furniture. Here he found his special niche.

Meanwhile, Justine fell in love with the county's good-hearted judge, Tommy McNamara, the one who had been so helpful to Jake and other kids who found themselves in trouble through no fault of their own.

"Of course, you'll still live with us," Justine told Jake matter-of-factly as she spooned a heaping serving of homemade macaroni and cheese onto his plate. "There's no reason for you to move."

Loving her as he did, he declined the offer. "You and the judge will be newlyweds, Justine. You don't need me hanging around here all the

time. Besides, I'm twenty-one now, and it's time for me to find my own place. Don't worry; I won't go too far away."

Justine crumpled into the chair next to him, pressing her hands on either side of his face, and kissed his forehead. "Don't you know I love you like my own son?"

"You've been a great mom, Justine," he said, causing a tear to trickle in a rivulet down the side of her nose as he held her tightly. "But I'm a man now, and it's time for me to go."

As he practiced his craft, Jake taught himself how to make furniture in many different styles, experimenting with the lathe to create spindles and other original ornamental designs that appeared in his mind's eye. But it was the art pieces his employer made for his own amusement that captivated Jake. He was fascinated by the delicate effects that could be produced with a heavy chain saw. He began experimenting in his free time and quickly discovered he had a real knack for chainsaw art. Before too long, Jake Campbell had made a name for himself as a tree-carver.

Now about to turn twenty-eight, he longed to settle down, get married, and have a family. He was tired of traveling for weeks and months on end, sleeping in his truck, and catching meals on the run. He believed he had built his business to the point that it could be expanded easily through the internet. He needed someone to help him do that, but he was sure it was possible. Anything was possible if you could envision what you wanted and were willing to put forth the effort to get it. He purchased a small log cabin in the woods near Walkers Corner and built a rough studio in back. It smelled of fresh cedar and pine shavings, and he loved being there. But one important element was still missing from his life.

Jake felt sure that his future happiness and success depended on convincing the elusive Holly Sherard that he was the man for her. For the past two years, as he frequented the tavern, he carefully watched Holly from a respectful distance, trying to engage her in conversation, to no avail. She was pleasant enough, but focused on her work and her little boy. He knew better than to force conversation on her, as so many of the bar customers did when they overstepped their bounds and caused her to blush and flee. *God, she was so beautiful.* How could any man leave her? Jake knew instinctively that Holly's history with her former

husband, coupled with her devotion to Evan, left her fearful of another failed relationship. Yet he couldn't help trying to win her heart.

He also had to admit that he was hesitant to start a relationship when he still needed to travel so often to make his living. A beautiful girl like Holly deserved a man who could stay in one place, protect, and provide well for her and her little boy. So Jake worked even harder, took on extra commissions, and traveled to places where new clients were willing to pay \$5,000 or more for one of his sculptures. He began to hear from museums and zoos. He was in demand at state fairs all over the country. Now he needed a website to build his business, and Holly as his wife, in that order.

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Holly turned down the light in the living room and sat at the kitchen table to pay some bills. The apartment was silent, except for the hum of the old refrigerator, as she toiled over her checkbook, willing there to be enough money to cover all their expenses with maybe enough left over for a new dress. She'd seen a pretty red velvet one in her size at Walmart. There was a light knock at the front door, which caused her to look fearfully at the securely-fastened deadbolt and chain. Pulling a robe over her nightshirt, she went to the door and asked cautiously who was there.

"It's me, Holly," Jake said. "I know it's late, but I just got back to town. I had to see you."

Holly fumbled with the locks and yanked open the front door, nearly squealing in excitement at the sight of him as she leaped into his waiting arms.

"Hi, gorgeous," he said tenderly and kissed her. They looked at one another disbelievingly, and he kissed her again before taking both of her hands in his. Holly shivered at the gentle touch of his strong, calloused hands.

"Shh," she said, leading him inside. "Evan's asleep. If we wake him up, we won't have a minute to ourselves."

"Hang on a sec," Jake whispered, and went back into the second floor stairwell to retrieve a dozen red roses. In her entire life, Holly had never received roses from anyone. She was completely enchanted.

"I brought Evan something, too," Jake said, and handed her a



handmade wood toy truck with wheels that really turned. "I had a lot of time to kill while I was missing you two."

Jake turned again to Holly, took her tenderly in his arms and kissed her again, running his hands through her silky hair. She felt her knees go weak at the feeling of belonging to him and realized that this must be what true love felt like. Certainly, she hadn't ever experienced this feeling of helpless, overwhelming emotion before, not even with Evan's father.

"I can't stay," Jake said, looking deeply into her eyes, "even though I really want to. Evan is here, and I want to do this the right way." He stepped back slightly. "I'd like to take you to dinner this Saturday for Valentine's Day, if you're not working. I'll pay for a babysitter."

Holly was nearly overcome with joy. "That sounds wonderful, Jake. I can switch schedules with one of the other girls, and my mother can babysit Evan. She doesn't mind. She and my dad never go anywhere."

"Whatever you think is best," Jake answered, knowing that it would be an early night, but understanding that she was worth the wait. "Now get some sleep. I'll see you tomorrow when I stop by the tavern."

He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her closer, looking deeply into her eyes. "I promise not to go anywhere else for a long time. And someday, you can go with me, you and Evan."

Holly looked back into the eyes of the man she loved and saw for the first time that her future could be something entirely different, unexpected, and new.

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"Jake!" Carole Hannah exclaimed, coming around the bar to give her prodigal bar customer a big hug. "I didn't know you were back in town."

Jake sported a fresh tan that made his blue eyes stand out even more dramatically. "I just got back last night. The zoo wants me to carve a giraffe and some other large animals for the children's section, so I can work in my studio until the weather warms up and there's more work around here."

"I'm guessing Holly will be glad to see you," Carole Hannah teased.



"Actually, I saw her last night," Jake said. "I went over there after Evan was asleep."

"Enough said."

Jake blushed under his tan. "I hope you don't think--" he said and stopped abruptly, chewing on his lower lip.

"It's none of my business, Jake. You and Holly are adults."

"Just so you know, I didn't stay over," Jake said, sitting down at the bar, his face flaming. "I have honorable intentions toward her, and I intend to earn her father's approval."

Carole Hannah placed her hand over Jake's. "I'm sure he'll approve when he gets to know you better. The rest of the Sherard family thinks the world of you, and my brother will, too. Reuben's a good guy, just real protective of his family."

"I'm protective of his daughter, too," Jake insisted softly. "I'll take good care of Holly and Evan."

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That evening, while she experimented with a new recipe for banana-pecan whole-wheat muffins, the phone rang. Seeing Mark's name come up on caller i.d., she quickly wiped the flour from her hands onto her jeans and forced herself to let the phone ring two more times before picking up.

"Hello?" she answered, trying to sound as if she hadn't been killing time until he called.

"Hello, Carole Hannah. It's Mark. I hope this is a good time to call."

"Perfect timing, Mark," she said, frantically petting the dog that danced in a circle around her feet.

"I wanted to say again how sorry I am that you thought I was avoiding you," he said, clearing his throat. "I guess I wasn't thinking that anyone would notice if I left the way I always do this time of year."

"No need, but apology accepted. Thank you."

"I went to Key West. It's one of my favorite places. It's where my wife and I used to go every winter break after our son was grown. Last year, it just wasn't the same without Kathleen. This year was no better."

"I can't imagine how hard it must be to lose a spouse so suddenly." She balanced herself on one leg, willing herself not to say too much.

Mark was silent for a moment before responding. "After I left Key West, I flew to Michael's house in Maryland. I thought that he and I had a few things to say to each other. He's been angry at me for so many years, and after his mother died, it got worse."

"Why? If you don't mind the question, that is," Carole Hannah probed gently. "You certainly weren't to blame for his mother's death."

"He blames me for being absent a lot while he was growing up. With the heavy undergraduate course load I taught for so many years and the research trips I took every summer, he's right: I was gone a lot. He also blames me for leaving Kathleen by herself so often. On top of that, he's angry because I strongly encouraged him to go into a field of science or engineering, when he wanted to be a journalist. I just wanted him to have a secure career," Mark explained. "I guess I didn't understand how good his writing had become or how much he wanted to do that kind of work."

"Sometimes I think there are times when our kids honestly dislike us for being disappointments to them," she said. "They want us to be perfect, and when they find out we aren't, they get disillusioned. I remember judging my mother because I thought she was too strict and closed-minded. And then I became a mom, and I understood how hard it is to be a parent. Michael will understand soon enough."

"I'm sure you're right," Mark said. "As it turns out, he was also under the impression that his mom died alone. I thought we talked about that before the funeral. Kathleen was with her friends playing golf, and she collapsed. She was taken immediately to the hospital by ambulance, but it took at least a half hour for her friends to find my office number after they got to the hospital. Kathleen never fully regained consciousness, but all of her best friends were there with her when she passed away." He paused. "Unfortunately, it's true; I wasn't. I got a call telling me to come to the hospital as soon as possible. No one told me she was already gone. I guess that's standard procedure."

"Mark, your guilt over that day isn't helping you finish grieving," Carole Hannah said softly, sinking into a chair. "You have to get past the mistaken belief that you had some control over what happened. Control is an illusion, anyway. None of us has control over this type of

thing. I wish there was something more I could say to comfort you, but I think it's just going to take more time."

"Time is all I've had," Mark said in exasperation. "It's why I decided to get more involved in the water cleanup project." There was another pause. "It's why I asked you to help me with the project. I don't want to grieve anymore, and Kathleen would want me to be happy. Hell, I want to be happy again, but in order to do that, I have to take a chance."

Carole Hannah waited, nearly breathless.

"I wondered if you would join me for dinner."

"Not Valentine's Day."

Mark laughed out loud. "How do you do that? How do you know what I'm thinking? It's uncanny," he said. "Actually, I was thinking that Valentine's Day might not be the best idea. I'm still a little raw, but I promise I'm getting better. How about this Friday night, instead? We could have a nice dinner away from the tavern and some unhurried conversation."

"That sounds perfect," Carole Hannah agreed. "I get off work at seven o'clock and will need to take a quick shower and change clothes. Will you be faint from hunger if we get together a little later, maybe eight fifteen or so?"

"Why don't I make reservations for eight thirty at Sophia's? I'll pick you up at eight fifteen." He paused. "I'm looking forward to seeing you."

"See you then." Carole Hannah replaced the phone in its cradle and wrapped her arms around Florabelle. "Is it okay with you if I start seeing a nice man named Mark?"

In response, Florabelle sat up on her hind legs and kissed her face.

## **Banana-Pecan Whole-Wheat Muffins**

1 1/2 cups whole-wheat flour  
1/2 cup plain fat-free or reduced-fat yogurt  
1/3 cup honey  
1/2 tsp. sea salt  
3 ripe bananas, mashed  
1/3 cup canola oil  
1/2 cup chopped pecans  
1/2 tsp. cinnamon  
1 tsp. baking soda  
1 tsp. baking powder  
1 large egg  
1/2 tsp. nutmeg  
1/8 tsp. ginger  
1/8 tsp. allspice  
1/2 tsp. vanilla

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Measure dry ingredients into a large bowl, and stir to mix. Combine wet ingredients in another bowl, and add bananas and pecans. Fold into dry ingredients, stirring until just combined. Place in greased muffin cups or paper muffin cups and bake for 10 to 13 minutes.

## Chapter 17

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ALTHEA PEERED OUT HER KITCHEN WINDOW, watching Evan play in the new-fallen snow. She smiled and bit her lower lip, watching him waddle like a penguin around the back yard through the deep drifts. She thought he looked remarkably like a fireplug in his red snowsuit, grey woolen cap with earflaps, and matching mittens.

While she baked bread for Sunday's Communion service, it became obvious that Evan desperately needed to burn off some excess energy, so she banished him outdoors. Now she watched as he made at least a dozen snow angels, fanning his arms and legs frantically in the snow. Then he ran around in circles as fast as he could until he made a deep groove in the snow and fell over backward, kicking his legs in the air.

Althea laughed in delight, remembering times when she had played in this same uninhibited way, before the seriousness of adolescence robbed her of simple, childish joy.

Dressed in grey flannel slacks and a cream-colored sweater she'd knitted recently, Althea was still remarkably beautiful at fifty-two. Her shoulder-length blonde hair (so blonde that silver strands only enhanced the natural color) was swept up in an elegant French knot and fastened with a few silver hairpins. Other than her gold wedding band, the only other accessory she wore was a pair of pearl earrings Reuben had given her on their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. To look at Althea with her high cheekbones and large cornflower-blue eyes, it took a moment to register that she wore no makeup. Her peaches-and-cream complexion



was entirely natural. Reuben disliked makeup and assured her regularly that she was beautiful without cosmetics.

After thirty years of marriage, Reuben was still deeply in love with his wife and best friend. People familiar with his strong personality and the way he related to others often assumed he was domineering in his relationship with his wife, as well, but it wasn't true. While Althea was selective about presenting an opposing viewpoint, it was because she understood that in time, he would always come around to seeing things her way. She was perfectly content in her life with Reuben, although that didn't mean she didn't have ambitions of her own. Yet she had a simple faith that all things happen for a reason, and it was this certainty that became the foundation for her serenity.

She had been introduced to him at a potluck dinner at the First Presbyterian Church in Johnstown after Reuben, fresh out of seminary, was assigned there as the youth minister. Althea, a new first-grade teacher, attended church there with her parents and older sister, Dorothy. The family was enjoying dessert when the young new minister suddenly appeared at their table looking handsome in a navy blue suit, his chestnut-colored hair combed neatly into place, and a shy smile on his face. Althea watched Dorothy subtly smooth the bangs away from her forehead as their father rose to shake Reuben's hand and invited him to join them for pie and coffee.

Reuben listened attentively as Dorothy was introduced first and urged to talk about her job as an operating room nurse at Memorial Hospital. Dorothy was five years older than Althea with no prospects yet for marriage. It was becoming a concern in the household since Dorothy was past the quarter-century mark. While Dorothy talked, Althea studied Reuben with a kind of detached fascination. She knew better than to speak up—not when Dorothy was in the spotlight.

"And this is our younger girl, Althea," her father said in a dismissive manner, not even bothering to mention his daughter's teaching career. He assumed Dorothy would be the first to marry, and wasn't this handsome young minister ideal as a potential son-in-law? Except that when Reuben telephoned the next day, it was Althea he invited to the movies. This was a shock even to Althea, who had long been accustomed to living in her older sister's shadow. After six months of courtship, Reuben asked for Althea's hand in marriage.

Three years later, when Althea was pregnant with their second child, Reuben accepted the call to be pastor of his home church in Walkers Corner. Holly, their youngest daughter, was born a couple of years later. As soon as the older children, Mariah Jane and Allen, were out of college, they moved to bigger cities to pursue their careers. With their twenty-something lifestyles, it was rare for the older Sherard offspring to travel from San Diego or New York City to visit Walkers Corner.

Reuben lamented that Mariah Jane and Allen lived so far away, but knew their prospects for good-paying work were limited here. And now that Mariah Jane was newly married, her husband (a lawyer from Brooklyn) made it clear that he didn't enjoy visiting Walkers Corner. Perhaps someday, Reuben thought, his older children would feel a nudge to spend more time in their hometown. For this reason, he had secretly enjoyed having Holly and Evan living at home.

The loss of Althea in the church office was particularly hard on Reuben. "I miss you," he often murmured into her hair when he greeted her after a long day at work. He had agreed without hesitation, however, when she insisted that Evan have family, rather than strangers, caring for him.

"You can get one of the older ladies from the Gethsemane Group to help out in the afternoons," Althea assured him when she announced that she intended to supervise Evan's afterschool activities. "That will help Holly, too, so she can work and not worry about daycare."

Loving Althea as he did, Reuben understood that there was yet another reason she wanted to be at home with their grandson. Although she enjoyed teaching Sunday School and summer vacation Bible school classes, there was something about teaching Evan his letters and numbers, helping him with his homework, and encouraging him to read every day that was fulfilling for her on another level. Reuben admired the way Althea structured Evan's afterschool care in much the same way she had managed her first grade classes. With a pang of guilt, he realized that she must have missed being a teacher all these years, although she'd never said a word about it to him.

Although it was rare for Althea to express a strong opinion one way or another, she had made it clear that she approved of Holly's decision to move out of their home. "It's important for her to know we believe in her," she had said.

Reuben knew, too, that Althea wholeheartedly approved of Holly's blossoming relationship with Jake Campbell and acknowledged that he seemed to be a hard-working, respectable guy and that he was good with Evan.

Now that Holly was interested in Jake, Althea hoped that her youngest daughter could marry again and have more children. She was fond of Jake and believed, from the way he looked at Holly and the mature manner in which he included Evan in their plans, that he'd be a wonderful husband and father. She was delighted that Holly and Jake were going to have a dinner date for Valentine's Day and made a point of announcing to Reuben that they would care for Evan overnight.

"That way, Jake can take Holly home afterward and they can have some privacy," she said as she tucked a pan of sticky buns into the oven.

Reuben heard the firmness in his wife's tone and knew the matter was closed to further discussion.

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That Friday evening, Carole Hannah hurried home from the tavern to shower and dress for her date with Mark. Donning a black knit dress with a colorful scarf and sleek black boots, she touched her favorite floral perfume oil to her pulse points and lightly brushed mascara onto her top lashes. Then she applied a matte rose lipstick and blotted it with a tissue to set the color.

Precisely at eight fifteen, Mark rang the doorbell. As soon as Carole Hannah answered the door, Florabelle greeted him by pressing herself against his knees so hard that he was unable to move forward.

"I hope you like chocolate-covered cherries. Oof!" he said, thrusting a heart-shaped box into Carole Hannah's hand while struggling to keep his balance.

"Love them," she said. "I hope you like obnoxious dogs."

Mark knelt in front of Florabelle and scratched behind her ears until she collapsed and rolled over onto her back to have her tummy scratched.

"Meet your new canine best friend," Carole Hannah joked. "Chocolates for me and doggie massage for her will get you points every time."

After an awkward moment of helping Carole Hannah on with her coat, while her arm repeatedly missed the sleeve, Mark took her gloved hand in his and they walked through the fresh powdered snow to his vehicle. Mark seemed more nervous than she would have imagined.

They drove to Sophia's, a nearby Italian restaurant, where they were ushered to a quiet table next to the blazing stone fireplace. Sophia's was known for its quiet ambience, a place where the wait staff was unobtrusive and careful not to interrupt business discussions or private conversations. After studying the wine list and asking Carole Hannah's preference, Mark ordered one of the more expensive bottles of cabernet sauvignon. The waiter returned with their wine, poured a small amount into Mark's glass for him to taste, and then filled both their glasses. After consulting the menu, they ordered dinner for two, consisting of a bruschetta appetizer, Caesar salads made tableside, chicken limonata with a side of linguine, and chocolate lava cakes for dessert.

Mark smiled at Carole Hannah and held up his glass. "To time and all the new possibilities it has to offer," he said as they clinked glasses.

"To time and making every moment count," she replied. "Mm, this is good."

Mark smiled. "I know you enjoy cooking and kayaking. What other things do you like to do?" He swirled the wine in his glass, taking an appreciative sniff.

"I like to cross-country ski, swim, and bike on the trail—oh, and I really love music," she said. "What about you?"

"Actually, it sounds like we enjoy the same things. If you want to, we can do some skiing next weekend—maybe Sunday afternoon."

"That would be great," Carole Hannah answered. "I haven't gotten out on the trail much this year."

"What kind of music do you like?"

"A little of everything," she said. "My friend, Terry, and I used to listen to the Beatles a lot when we were kids, but she also introduced me to a lot of other music I wouldn't have gotten to hear, otherwise."

"Are you as artistically gifted as your sister?"

Carole Hannah chuckled. "I draw a mean stick figure. Nope, Sandy got all the artistic talent in our family."

"Art talent passed me by, too," he admitted. "But I admire Sandy's paintings. I'd really like to own one someday."



"Her paintings continue to increase in value," she said proudly. "You'd be wise to buy one sooner than later."

Mark told her that he'd finished his undergraduate biology degree at Virginia Tech before completing master's and doctoral studies in environmental studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He met Kathleen when he was an instructor in environmental science at the University of Virginia, and she was a part-time instructor in the humanities. They moved to Walkers Corner when both were able to get full-time teaching jobs at nearby Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

"This area was perfect for the outdoor life we wanted to lead, and of course, it was a great place to raise Michael. We were married thirty-two years, almost thirty-three, when she died," Mark said. "Michael is our only child."

Mark was careful not to talk about Kathleen after that, preferring instead to concentrate on Carole Hannah, who was beginning to capture his attention in every way. From her fine mind and quick wit to her lovely face and figure, he already knew this was a woman who could engage him on every level.

Carole Hannah filled him in on the career path that had taken her into educational fundraising. "I started at the university as a grant writer and that morphed into other things. I did alumni special events and then annual fundraising before going into major gift work and planned giving. I got another job offer to move to another school across the state line, and that was when I was offered the vice presidency of the foundation."

"Vice presidents don't often just up and leave," Mark noted quizzically. "You must have been unhappy."

"I wasn't unhappy, exactly, and I knew my position was secure." She set her glass down, considering the question. "It just wasn't what I thought I'd do with my life. It was as though life happened *to* me, rather than me making choices and taking actions to achieve my goals. Originally, I thought I'd come back here and teach high school English. But then I met my daughters' father at Penn State, and we moved to Kansas for his career."

"Have you been divorced long?" Mark asked, averting his eyes.

"About ten years," she answered quickly, knowing that the point of his question was to find out whether she was still carrying a torch for



her ex-husband. In that case, she hoped he hadn't heard anything about her on-and-off past relationship with Tony Whittaker.

"It was a 'good' divorce, if there is such a thing. The actual decision was more like extinguishing a smoking match, though; there was still the possibility of getting burned. We had every reason to take care with one another for the sake of our daughters."

She took a sip of her wine. "All during our marriage, I reacted to Tim's needs, rather than being proactive about what I wanted in life. That certainly wasn't his fault, but it made the years after the divorce much more difficult. I had to figure out who I was."

She paused for a moment, trying to read Mark's expression, and knew from the way his eyes met hers that he wanted to hear more. She got quiet for a moment, considering her next comment.

"My job at the university provided a good income, so I stayed, even though I really wanted to do something else. Sometimes it's easier to go along with what seems safe, instead of striking out and taking a chance. Yet all those years, I dreamed about cooking professionally, and I always wanted to write a cookbook."

She smiled, remembering the dreams she'd had for so many years that had eventually brought her to this point. "I began to remember how much I enjoyed cooking at the tavern when I was a teenager. Finally, the time seemed ideal, and I took a leap of faith and resigned from the university to move back here."

"And are you sure it was the right decision?"

"Very," Carole Hannah said. "I am finally the woman I always knew I could become."

A smile crossed Mark's face as he poured the rest of the wine into their glasses. "And I am finally getting to know the woman you are now. I consider myself very fortunate."

When they arrived back at Carole Hannah's house, she invited him in for an after-dinner brandy and coffee. He eagerly accepted the invitation and happily played fetch with Florabelle while Carole Hannah prepared a tray of decaffeinated coffee, brandy, and lemon bars.

"May I?" Mark asked as she set the tray on the coffee table. He poured two fingers of brandy into each snifter, handing one to Carole Hannah. They sipped their brandy and coffee, talking effortlessly for over an hour until Mark noticed the time.

"It's after midnight," he said, setting his coffee cup on the tray. He took Carole Hannah's hand. "I really ought to be going now. It's late and I know you have to work tomorrow."

They stood up together, still linking hands, and walked to the door, where Mark accepted his coat and wool scarf. He lifted her chin and kissed Carole Hannah's mouth gently, his lips pressing hers in a way that caused a distinct flutter in her chest.

"I had a good time tonight," he said. "May I call you tomorrow?"

"That would be nice. I had a good time, too," Carole Hannah said and lifted her face as he leaned in to kiss her again—longer this time.

Later, as she snuggled under her plush blankets, she offered up a quick prayer of thanks for a wonderful evening and for the possibility of new love. With that, she fell into a deep sleep, a sprig of fresh rosemary under her pillow to encourage the pleasant dreams she was sure would follow.

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On Valentine's Day, Jake and Holly delivered Evan to his grandparents' house promptly at six o'clock. Holly looked striking in her new red dress, corn silk-colored hair curled luminously about her face and shoulders.

Reuben greeted Jake with a firm handshake and, with a look that was almost palpable in its meaning, kissed Holly on the cheek. "You look beautiful, sweetheart," he said with some difficulty. "You remind me more of your mother every day."

"Thank you, Daddy," Holly said, and met her mother's serene gaze.

"Pastor Sherard, I wonder if you could give me a hand," Jake said. Turning to Holly and Althea, he asked, "Would you please excuse us for a minute? I have something in the back of my truck that I'd like to give Holly, but I could use a hand bringing it in the house."

Reuben put on his boots and followed Jake out of the house while Holly and her mother speculated about what could possibly require the strength of two men to carry.

"Oh, my," Althea said, holding the door wide open as Jake and Reuben placed an oak loveseat in front of Holly. Jake had carved

likenesses of Holly and Evan on either side of the seat, their arms outstretched across the back, hands linking.

"That's me! And you, too, Mommy!" Evan was already kneeling on the seat, touching the spot where his hand met Holly's.

"Jake," Holly murmured, her voice quavering, "it's beautiful. I can't believe you made this for me."

Althea dabbed at her eyes, which had grown moist. Holly's arms encircled Jake's neck as she kissed him on the cheek. Evan jumped up and down excitedly until they included him in a group hug.

"Happy Valentine's Day," Jake said. "I wanted you to have something from my own hands. I thought your parents might enjoy seeing it, too."

"Son, this is a wonderful gesture, very fine," Reuben said, clearing his throat awkwardly. "My wife and I are grateful for the time it took for you to make this and for being so good to our girl."

Jake reddened in pleasure. "It's my pleasure, sir."

"Now," Reuben said, "you two go on and have a wonderful evening. Don't worry about Evan. We'll keep him until morning."

After Holly and Jake were gone, Reuben embraced Althea and kissed her tenderly, brushing a wisp of stray hair from her eyes. "After we put Evan to bed," he said with a wink, "let's not forget that it's Valentine's Day for us, too."

## Althea's Sticky Buns

### Dough:

1 pkg. dry yeast  
1 cup scalded milk, lukewarm  
1/2 cup sugar  
1 tsp. salt  
2 eggs, beaten  
1/2 cup melted shortening  
4 1/2 cups all-purpose flour

### Cinnamon Spread:

Soft butter  
2 tbsp. cinnamon  
1 cup sugar

### Topping:

1 cup butter  
1 1/3 cups brown sugar  
4 tsp. light corn syrup

Place yeast in bowl. Add lukewarm milk and stir until dissolved. Stir in sugar, salt, and eggs. Add half the shortening and half the flour, and beat until smooth. Add remaining flour and mix well. Add remaining shortening and mix. Knead until smooth. Place dough in a greased bowl, cover, and let rise until double. Roll out the dough into two 9 X 18 inch rectangles. Spread each rectangle with soft or melted butter and sprinkle with cinnamon and sugar mixture. Roll up tightly from the long side. Pinch edges together and cut into one-inch slices.

To make the topping, melt the butter and add sugar and corn syrup. Bring to a rolling boil and remove from heat immediately. Do not overcook this mixture. Pour into two 9 X 13 inch pans. Place rolls cut side down in the pans. Cover and let rise until double in size. Bake at 375 degrees for 20 to 30 minutes. Turn over immediately onto aluminum foil.

## Chapter 18

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THE NEXT TIME CAROLE HANNAH SAW Tony alone, he was sitting at a table in the bar, drinking a scotch on the rocks, and staring off into space. An appetizer-size plate of fried pierogies sat untouched in front of him, and she saw that he had lost a noticeable amount of weight.

"What's with the new, thinner you? Have you been sick?" she asked, plunking into the chair across from him.

"Been working out a lot," Tony said. "I hate being cooped up inside every night."

Carole Hannah nodded. "I'd almost forgotten how long winters can get here, especially by the time February rolls around."

She recognized, without another word from Tony, that he was deeply depressed.

"It must be tough during the winter, when construction slows," she said, although she had a pretty good idea of the reason for his dark mood.

"We've always got enough work to do," he said gruffly, not meeting her eyes. "Work's fine."

Silence fell over them for a few moments before Tony looked up. "I'm sure you could care less what's happening with me. You've hardly got time to even talk to me now that you're seeing that guy."

Carole Hannah felt her cheeks flush with indignation, but she maintained her composure by taking a slow, deep breath. "Tony, that's not fair. Don't you think I have a right to have a relationship, too?"



She endeavored to keep her voice calm and impassive. "Mark is a good person, and we have a nice time together."

Tony turned his gaze full force to Carole Hannah. "I bet you do. Don't you know how hard this is for me?" he demanded furiously.

"No, I guess I don't!" she shot back in a loud whisper. "Tell me how hard it is for you to be engaged to someone who loves you and would do anything to make you happy. Am I supposed to put my life on pause just because you're miserable?"

"Don't you know I'd leave her if you asked me to?" Tony asked plaintively.

Carole Hannah put her palms face down on the table in front of her and took a deep breath. "I'm not going to do that. If you're unhappy with Carla, it's your life, your choice."

"I'm only asking if you'll be there for me."

"I've always cared for you, Tony. If you weren't engaged, we could have this discussion without it feeling so wrong. But you're the only one who can make that kind of choice, and I'm not—I repeat not—going to feel badly about making choices for my own life. I'm also not going to have discussions like this one anymore. Damn it, how could you?" she mumbled, tears filling her eyes.

Tony glared at her, but said nothing more as Carole Hannah got up from the table. She walked into the kitchen, head held high, leaving him alone with his drink and his thoughts.

Gil tactfully moved to the other side of the bar. He could sense that this was a critical turning point, but his heart turned over in sympathy for all four people involved.

Later that night, as Tony turned back the covers on his side of the king-sized bed, Carla rolled over. "It's late," she said between yawns. "Where've you been?"

"I stopped by the tavern to watch the game," he answered. "Sorry if I woke you. Go back to sleep."

Carla raised the nightgown over her head and sidled over to the other side of the bed, pressing her body against Tony and kissing the back of his neck. "I love you, honey," she whispered as she caressed him, the tips of her fingers light on his skin.

"I'm really beat," he said. He closed his eyes, careful to keep his breathing slow and even, feigning sleep.

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The following Sunday afternoon, Carole Hannah and Mark headed to the trail to enjoy an unusually sunny winter afternoon. Mark brought along his cross-country skis, but Carole Hannah had opted to try out the new pair of snowshoes and poles her parents had given her for Christmas.

Dressed in multiple layers, they were already sweating but well-prepared for the elements, at least, in silk long-johns, snow pants, vests, heavy jackets, woolen hats, and heavy gloves.

Mark held out hand warmers to Carole. "You might need these. Can't have you getting frostbite," he said, tearing open the package to initiate the chemical reaction. He inserted the warm fabric squares into the palms of her gloves.

The temperature was in the high-twenties with a wind chill in the teens; yet the sky was a clear, brilliant blue, and the sun felt warm on their faces as they set out on the trail. Snow was piled over two feet high on either side of them, so light and powdery that it appeared crystalline in the brilliant sunshine. Shadows from the trees stretched before them in shades of violet and blue. Without sunglasses, they would have been nearly blinded by the intense glare from the fresh snow. Glistening snowflakes continued to fall gently from the sky all around them, adding to the feeling of magic for Carole Hannah.

Mark stopped for a moment to gesture with one of his ski poles at several large trees. The wind had blown conical drifts high up the trunks as if someone had gently padded snow around them for safekeeping. Mark pulled out his camera to take photos of this curious wind effect.

"Maybe your sister could paint this scene for me. It would look great over my big stone fireplace."

"She can paint anything you want," Carole Hannah said. "You're right. It's fantastic and so weirdly beautiful the way the snow wraps around each tree like a fluffy blanket."

They continued on another half-mile, passing only a handful of other people along the trail. As she high-stepped through the snow just behind Mark, Carole Hannah was grateful for the hand warmers and for Mark's thoughtfulness in providing them.

"Look here," Mark said to her suddenly, pointing to several wet rocks.

"Why aren't these rocks covered in snow, too?" Carole Hannah asked, bending over to take a closer look. "They almost look like they're steaming."

"These rocks go deeper, where the ground temperature is probably fifty degrees or so. That keeps the rocks warmer than the snow that accumulates on them."

They moved quickly along the trail, stopping occasionally to investigate deer tracks or to listen to the cracks of trees in the freezing air. People unfamiliar with the forest sometimes feared that large branches were about to fall on them. Even in the dead of winter, the cracks were sounds of life.

Overhead, an eagle soared up and over the treetops, dramatically gliding along the strong air currents before landing on a branch of one of the barren trees. Carole Hannah felt blissful as she followed the trail Mark's skis left in the fresh powder. Early on, he had asked politely if she wanted to break trail, but she was happier watching him move skillfully through the snow. It allowed her to be alone with her thoughts and to feel at one with everything around her.

They went another quarter-mile down the trail before Mark stopped. "We probably need to turn around and go back," he said. "In this deep snow, people get exhausted faster than they realize."

Carole Hannah nodded, slightly out of breath already. Despite the layers she wore, her backside was freezing. As Mark continued on, her eyes were drawn to his powerful strides and the way his outdoor gear hugged his physique. Over the past week, her attraction to Mark had grown by leaps and bounds.

When they reached the parking lot, he pushed the releases on his skis and stepped out of them, resting the skis and poles against his SUV. Then he turned to help Carole Hannah remove her snowshoes, extending his arm to support her as she balanced on one leg.

"I hope you had fun," he said. "You were so quiet. Did I go too fast?"

Carole Hannah's eyes widened and she blinked twice. "No, I thought you set a good pace, challenging but not too strenuous. Actually, I just really enjoyed being out in the snow." She moved closer and added, "And I liked watching you. I really like being with you."

A look that was half pain, half delight crossed Mark's face. For a

moment, she felt anxious that she had crossed a line that might cause him to turn away from her. She remained still, however, watching a series of expressions from shock to uncertainty and finally acceptance cross his face.

He took a deep breath and removed his gloves. Without a word, he took a few steps forward until he stood directly in front of Carole Hannah. Then he leaned toward her, placed his hands on either side of her cold face, and kissed her.

"You are so special to me," he said.

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Rev. Randall Shelby grew up in a small Ohio town near the Pennsylvania border, the youngest son of strict, devoutly religious parents. His father, a welder, left the house at six thirty each morning, steel lunch bucket in hand, and returned home at three thirty, expecting dinner to be on the table at four thirty and not a minute later.

As the meal was served, the children were summoned and quickly bowed their heads while Ralph Shelby said grace.

"For this food and drink, we give thanks, oh Lord," Ralph mumbled as his wife anxiously slid into her chair and lowered her eyes. Randall and his younger brother, John, and older sister, Alice, were expected to eat their dinner without complaint. The only conversation permitted was about school or church activities.

Discipline in the Shelby household was strict and swift. "Don't you dare cry or I'll give you something to cry about," Ralph often warned the children before backhanding them, anyway. They were reminded every day by their mother not to make noise or speak disrespectfully to their father.

Randall's mother, a joyless woman with tired eyes, rarely left the family's narrow frame house near the railroad tracks except to grocery shop, attend church, or occasionally see her parents, who lived nearby. She kept a spotless home, despite the gritty filth that blew in daily from rail cars carrying coal through town. Long hours were spent cooking, baking, endlessly washing, and rinsing the family's clothes with an old wringer washer, and then hanging everything up to dry in the basement. Ralph liked all of his work shirts starched, the trousers ironed



with sharp creases, and his handkerchiefs lightly starched and pressed, which is how his wife spent most of her waking hours.

When Randall's older sister, Alice, was seventeen, she left home without warning—tucking a terse, scribbled note of apology to her mother behind the sugar bowl. They never saw her again, although she never forgot to send Christmas and birthday presents to her mother, Randall, and John. Ralph Shelby never spoke of Alice again, except to comment on the gifts.

“God willin’, she ain’t doin’ nothin’ immoral to pay for these,” he said gruffly to Randall and John. “I don’t know what I did to deserve a daughter like that. Yep, Alice is on her way to hell for what she done, leavin’ like that.”

Randall's earliest memories of his parents involved mostly one-sided exchanges in low voices, followed by the slamming of their bedroom door. From the other side of the thin wall, Randall heard plaintive sounds from his mother as the rhythmic bumping of the headboard against the wall began. Randall and John tried to ignore the high-pitched, worrisome sounds she made as they did their homework until finally, there was silence. Within minutes, their mother crept out of the room, clutching her old robe about her, to wash at the sink while their father fell asleep. Sometimes Randall thought he heard her crying behind the bathroom door. It would be many years later, after she died of pancreatic cancer, that Randall learned her name was Louisa. He'd never heard his father call her anything. In fact, Randall hadn't thought of her as having a first name.

His father took him aside on his thirteenth birthday to explain the facts of life. “Jesus was a man, a normal man, even as he was God in human form,” Ralph began gruffly, reading from a well-thumbed pamphlet. “Man was created in God’s image. Woman is a helper created by God to serve man.”

Then in an odd segue that made perfect sense to Ralph, he shut the pamphlet and said, “When a man takes a wife, it’s her duty to submit to her husband. Whatever he does to her is his Christian right.”

Randall, accustomed to sermons about the divinity of Jesus Christ, had a difficult time imagining how the Lord could possibly approve of any of the activities his father now was describing in graphic detail. But he listened without asking any questions.



"Someday when you take a woman, you'll understand," Ralph finished, tossing the brochure with crude, anatomical drawings onto Randall's lap. "Read this."

Throughout his youth, Randall was taught the importance of being good. It was a vague concept, to be sure. He greatly admired the pastor of his church, a burly man who exuded confidence and wielded great power over his congregation. To be good, Randall thought with some confusion, must mean that a man had to show power over others.

Randall's father was a regular churchgoer, and this meant he was a good man. He was head of the family over his wife and children, and their lives were under his control. This was as it was supposed to be, or so he was told. Unfortunately, it was also true that Ralph Shelby was powerless to fix any of the problems at the fabricating plant where he worked, according to his frequent tirades at the dinner table. But where power really mattered, which was in a man's home, Ralph was lord and master. Not surprisingly, this led Randall to believe that, in God's eyes, it was fine for a man to use force against his wife and children.

The pastor at church often paraphrased scripture, telling his congregation that good parents should not "spare the rod and spoil the child." In this way, at least, Ralph Shelby excelled at parenthood.

As an acolyte, lighting and extinguishing the altar candles for each Sunday service, Randall observed the preacher carefully and began to envision himself as an ordained minister. He pictured himself standing on the altar in a white robe with a purple sash, preaching to the people of his own congregation. He would show them how they, too, could be good and find ultimate favor in the eyes of the Lord.

Unfortunately, Randall's time in seminary was anything but stellar, and he barely scraped by with a B-minus average. Never a strong orator, Randall was long-winded with a tendency to go off on tangents of circular reasoning. Nevertheless, he mimicked other speakers he'd heard, making his voice rise and fall with emotion, pounding the podium with his fist, just as the pastor at his home church had done. Randall's theological instructors would "ahem" and "ah-hah," suggesting tactfully that he read more scripture, tighten up his sermon, and cease expounding on the topic at hand with his own peculiar religious views. Following ordination, Randall was assigned to one tiny rural church after another. His contracts were never renewed after a year or two.

During his second year as a minister, he married Patricia, a nineteen-year-old member of his congregation, who had a pronounced stutter. She was pretty enough, he thought, but plain-featured in a way that suggested godliness and was sure to be a boon to his reputation as an up-and-coming minister. A preacher could not have a wife who was too good-looking, and he didn't need her to talk, anyway. He insisted that she submit to his sexual demands every night to demonstrate his position as head of household. When she became pregnant and then miscarried, he forgave her.

"You'll do better next time," he told her as she wept in the emergency room.

The second and third times Patricia miscarried, Randall grew frustrated with her failures. "There'll be no more trips outside this house, except to church and the grocery store, until you give me a child," he told her disgustedly. "It's your duty as a Christian woman to bear children."

A year later, still no children came of the marriage, and Patricia was beginning to exhibit suspicious discolorations on her face, neck, and arms. Two years later, she left Randall and returned to her parents' home. A police report was filed at the insistence of her father, but nothing came of it. There was whispered speculation among the congregation of the preacher's treatment of his young wife, and again, his contract was not renewed.

Randall accepted an assignment in another rural church and married a second time after a whirlwind courtship—to an eighteen-year-old named Cynthia, whose face and figure were definitely worth observing. He counseled her about the role of a woman in marriage and threw out any article of clothing that was too tight or showed cleavage. Her parents were only too happy to marry Cynthia off to a preacher since, if truth be told, the second Mrs. Shelby was a bit more spirited than her predecessor. While Cynthia was not thrilled with Randall as her new husband, she was relieved to get away from her parents' strict home environment. As it turned out, life with Randall was anything but freeing.

Within three months, Cynthia began covering her bruises with heavy makeup she hid from Randall. The slightest word from her that was not in direct response to a question was enough to throw him into

a rage. He criticized her cooking, housekeeping, and lovemaking. After a year, when a deacon's wife asked Cynthia about the parade of bruises up and down her arms and neck, she made the mistake of confiding what had happened the night before. The woman told her husband, which resulted in the deacon immediately informing Randall that his wife was accusing him of abuse.

"You are my wife, my property! I can do whatever I want to you!" Randall yelled at Cynthia, throwing her against the dining room wall so hard, a framed picture fell to the floor and glass shards splintered in every direction. As her head hit the plaster with a thud and she slid down the wall into a frightened heap at his feet, he continued his tirade. "A woman's role is subservient to her husband, and he has a right to do whatever he pleases. I'm the man in this house! Do what you're supposed to do and stop fighting me, and I won't have to be so hard on you!"

Eventually, Cynthia, too, disappeared from Randall's life. There was an interim stop at a battered women's shelter before she moved to Virginia to live with her sister, anxious to get as far away from Randall as possible. Members of the congregation clucked their tongues in disbelief at the rumors they heard. Reverend Shelby was a man of God. Surely this was just a case of a young, hysterical woman's overactive imagination; truth be told, Cynthia had always been undisciplined. It was only after mothers in the congregation began to watch their teenage daughters closely, whenever the Reverend was in their presence, that the deacons elected not to renew his contract.

Since then, Randall had remained a devout albeit single servant of the Lord as he threw the full weight of his faith into his own religious creation—an unaffiliated church that he named the Holy Ghost Church of Love, located just outside Walkers Corner in an abandoned storefront. Occasionally, he dated women he met from nearby towns, but rarely did these liaisons result in a second or third date. Randall Shelby soon had quite an undesirable reputation, and only he was unaware of it.

## Creekside Tavern Pierogies

### Filling:

8 potatoes, skinned and diced  
4 tbsp. butter  
1 onion, chopped fine  
1 cup grated cheddar cheese  
Salt and pepper to taste

Boil potatoes. Meanwhile, melt butter and sauté onions until translucent. Mash potatoes. Add sautéed onions, cheese, salt, and pepper immediately to mashed potatoes, and mix well.

### Dough:

3 cups flour  
1 egg  
¾ cup warm water  
1 tbsp. butter  
¼ tsp. salt

Work egg into flour with a fork. Add salt, warm water and melted butter; mix well. Knead dough until firm and smooth. Cover it with a slightly damp cloth and let stand for about 10 minutes. Roll dough to about 1/8 inch thickness and cut into three-inch circles. Spoon potato-cheese filling on one side of dough round and pinch edges firmly to seal. Drop pierogies into boiling, salted water. As pierogies rise to the top, lower heat and cook about 8 to 10 minutes longer. Drop into cold water to stop pierogies from cooking, and then drain.

If desired, sauté additional onions in butter, and gently fry pierogies until golden brown on each side. Drizzle with butter and onions.

## Chapter 19

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ALL EYES WERE ON TERRY MACDONALD as she belted out the lyrics to her favorite song, *Heartbreaker*, while members of the band gave it their all on guitars and drums. Victoria sang backup vocals for Terry, whose dramatic performance of the Pat Benatar song had already brought audience members to their feet.

The tavern was packed this Saturday night in early March as a sweep of mild temperatures brought an unseasonable, welcome thaw. After a winter of ice and often thigh-deep snow, the residents of Walkers Corner were desperate to get out of their homes.

With all available Sherard hands on deck at the tavern, Reuben offered to keep an eye on Evan so that Althea could lend a hand to Connie, Carole Hannah, Sandy, and Holly.

“Go,” he said, shooing Althea away with a grin. “I think I can handle one six-year-old for an entire evening.”

By eleven thirty, Street was finishing its last set as a few couples continued to dance freestyle near the bandstand. Gil and Sandy tended a standing-room-only bar crowd while Holly and Althea cleaned the dining room for the night. With the kitchen closed to new food orders, Carole Hannah prepared a breakfast casserole for the next morning’s buffet.

Randall Shelby sat at one corner of the bar, watching Terry as she performed. He felt a mixture of arousal and disapproval at the provocative way she moved around the stage, holding the microphone close to her lips.



He had been at the bar all evening, alternating beers with sticky-sweet coffee. Now he noticed Tony Whittaker silently sipping a drink as he listened to the music. *As usual, his woman is at home alone while he's here*, Randall thought. He openly disapproved of Tony and Carla's living arrangements and had once counseled Tony, while they were seated at the bar, that it was wrong in the eyes of the Lord to live with a woman outside the marital bonds. Sexual relations, however, were another matter, he noted.

"God knows, men have needs," he said with authority.

Tony, who was dismissive of Randall's opinion on any topic, had replied pointedly, "I'd rather live in sin than be divorced twice like some other godly men we know, Reverend."

Randall never seemed to learn his lesson. Tonight, ignoring the obvious signs that Tony was in no mood for conversation, he moved closer, nudged him with his elbow, and indicated Terry with a crook of his thumb. "God bless her. I'm betting there aren't too many members of that band who don't know that little lady *real* well," he remarked.

"You're a dickhead, Reverend," Tony snapped, turning his back.

Randall looked around to make sure no one else had heard him being disparaged in such a manner.

Overhearing the exchange, Gil bit his lip and set out more seasoned pretzels and buttered popcorn while he kept a close eye on his bar customers' alcohol intake and behavior. He hoped Tony wouldn't order another scotch. If he did, he'd have to suggest coffee, instead. It wasn't unheard of that customers would get belligerent and offended at the suggestion that they'd had enough to drink for one night, but Gil knew this was unlikely behavior from Tony. It was highly unusual, however, for Tony to be so sullen and quiet.

As Terry moved into *Crazy on You* by Heart, the crowd on the dance floor began to thin, except for the die-hards. Randall watched as Terry finished the song to applause and a spattering of appreciative whistles, and then accepted a bottle of beer handed to her by the bass player. She took a swig, lifting it in salute and thanks to her band member.

*She shouldn't be doing that*, Randall thought. *I wonder if she's been to bed with that guy*. He had given up trying to gain Sandy's attention that evening as she busied herself at the bar. He had tried to talk with

her early on, to no avail. Now his attention was on Terry, at least for tonight.

As Terry thanked the audience and prepared for one last song, Randall sent over a bottle of cheap light beer. He knew that women were more concerned about their weight than about the quality of the beer they drank, and he wasn't about to spend more than a few dollars on a lounge singer. Terry's eyes narrowed questioningly at Holly, who set the beer on a nearby table, rolled her eyes, and motioned with her head in Randall's direction. Randall met Terry's cool gaze and raised his eyebrows suggestively. Terry ignored the beer and moved immediately into *Run, Baby, Run* by Sheryl Crow.

She couldn't avoid Randall's attention forever, she knew, and made a mental note to steer clear of him afterward. He had been at the bar since the band began playing, and she wasn't taking any chances that he'd want to talk with her.

As midnight approached, she went into the kitchen to find Carole Hannah. "Hey, aren't you almost done in here?"

"I will be, after I finish getting some of these items for the breakfast buffet ready."

Terry leaned against one of the counters to watch her. "Are you and Mark getting together after you're done working?"

"Not this late," Carole Hannah said.

"Ah," Terry said knowingly. "Still no action, eh?"

"Neither of us feels it's time for that yet." Carole Hannah said stiffly, raising her eyebrows at Terry. "We've been dating less than a month, Terry. For heaven's sake, we barely know each other."

Terry sighed. "I'm happy for you, Cee. You guys look good together." Her eyes opened in surprise at the grilled cheese sandwich and potato chips Carole Hannah handed her. "Hey, thanks. How'd you know I was about to ask you for--?"

"I'm not sure how 'together' we are," Carole Hannah continued without missing a beat. "I'm certainly fond of him. It might still be a little early for him to be interested in a serious relationship."

"I sure wish there was another decent single guy in this town," Terry said. "The only man available now is that awful Randall. Tony is on the hook, for sure. In fact, Carla told my mom that she plans to marry him by fall. She's giving him an ultimatum."

"That's never a wise thing to do," Carole Hannah remarked, covering a tray of fresh fruit with plastic wrap. "Tony's at war with himself. His reaction might just surprise her."

"Wanna stay and have a glass of wine?" Terry asked, hoping against hope that she wouldn't have to talk to Randall without a buffer.

"Not tonight; I'm really beat, and I need to get home to Florabelle. I'll walk out with you, though."

"I need to stay for a few more minutes," Terry said. "You go on ahead."

"See you in the morning at church," Carole Hannah said, hugging her. Then she slipped out the kitchen door to her car.

Terry found a Pepsi in the fridge and sat down at one of the counters to finish her sandwich and chips before heading out to the bar. Other members of Street were already gone, but around the bar area, it was still standing room only. She stopped to talk to a few people she knew before putting on her jacket and retrieving her purse from behind the bar.

"G'night, Gil," she said. "Thanks again."

He handed her a check. "You sounded real good tonight, honey. You need someone to walk you to your car?"

"Thanks, but I'm parked pretty close. I'll be fine," she answered, and left by the side door, thinking of nothing else except a late-night movie and a glass of wine.

As she walked outside, she suddenly remembered that the main parking lot had been full when she arrived, so she had parked in the far corner of the back parking area. Above her, she noticed pinpoints of starlight in the clear indigo sky and stopped for a moment, enjoying the stillness of the night after the noise of the crowded bar. No one else was around as she stepped behind snow-plowed mountains of dirty snow and fumbled in her leather jacket for her car keys.

Suddenly she felt a hand on her shoulder. Letting out a small cry, she turned quickly and found herself face-to-face with Randall.

"Oh! Randy, you startled me," Terry said, turning to face him as an uneasy feeling washed over her. "Thanks for the beer. You shouldn't have, but it was thoughtful of you, anyway."

Randall pressed himself within inches of her body. "You could thank me another way," he said, pinching her chin and jutting it toward him. "I like you, Terry."

"Cut it out, Randy." Irritation and scorn were heavy in Terry's voice now as she shook her head to free herself from his touch. "Back off."

Randall placed his hand at the back of Terry's neck and pulled her face toward his, angling her body against the car door. Breathing heavily, he pressed his wet mouth against hers and began probing with his tongue until she gagged and choked.

She felt nauseated, furious, and frightened all at the same time as she struggled to push him away. The strong, sour smell of beer mixed with coffee was sickening on his breath as he continued forcing his mouth over hers, grinding his pelvis against her body.

"Get away from me! You're disgusting," Terry cried. She slapped Randall as hard as she could.

He recoiled and grabbed her shoulders, shaking her so hard she became dizzy. Blinking rapidly to clear her vision, she fought to plant her feet firmly on the ground, all the time striking at Randall with both fists.

"You're a joke." Randall snickered. "Everyone knows about that husband of yours. He's going to hell for his sins." He held her arms, pinning her against the car door as the back of her head struck the driver's side window.

"Well, I'm sure you'll see him there!" She knew it was the worst thing she could have said when she saw the look that flashed over his face.

Randall's eyes narrowed, and his cheeks and nose grew mottled and purple. Terry fought to push him away, but he was stronger than she would have believed possible. She let out a shrill cry and raised her knee swiftly to his crotch, but he was too quick and backed away before she could make contact. He yanked her arm behind her back, twisting it until she felt something give.

Terry felt real pain now. "Randall, stop it! You're hurting me!"

"You're not worth it," he said bitterly. Releasing her arm, he stepped away.

Stifling small gasps, Terry quickly got into her Accord, slammed the door, and hit the power lock button. She started the car and screeched away, tears clouding her vision and spilling down her cheeks. She was more afraid than she'd ever been in her life, hardly able to believe what had just happened. She'd never suspected that Randall was capable of



that kind of behavior. He'd clearly had too much to drink, she reasoned, but that still didn't explain why he assumed she'd welcome his advances. She felt humiliated at being reminded of Royce and the failure of her marriage, and felt even more embarrassed that she'd allowed herself to be cornered alone with Randall in a dark, deserted parking lot, especially after Gil offered an escort.

*People would think it was my own fault,* she thought.

As he watched Terry's car speed out of the parking lot and down the highway, Randall stood unnoticed in the parking lot, a sneer on his face, as several smokers exited the bar and stood near the door. He felt satisfied that no one had seen or heard what happened with Terry.

"She's not good enough for me, anyway," he muttered as he headed to his car. He still needed to prepare his sermon for the next morning's ten o'clock service. Now at least he had his topic. "Judgment Day is closer than she thinks," he said, getting into his car.

As soon as Terry got home, she ran to the front door and unlocked it with shaking hands before slamming it and turning the deadbolt. She checked all the other doors in the house and the windows, too. Then, recalling Randall's kiss, still able to taste his saliva, she vomited repeatedly. When she was finally able to stand, she wiped perspiration from her forehead, scrubbed her face, and brushed her teeth twice, trying to wipe away the taste and smell of Randall.

*No matter what,* she thought, *I won't let him get to me.* She knew she should report to Gil what had happened in the parking lot, but felt too embarrassed that she hadn't taken him up on his offer to have someone walk her to her car. "There's no use making him feel bad about this," she said. "It's over now, and I'm okay. I'll be okay."

Hugging her knees to her chest and still shivering from the shock of her ordeal, she arranged a bag of frozen peas over her aching wrist and curled up on a chair away from the windows. There she wrapped herself in a quilt, unable to close her eyes, too afraid to sleep.



## **Tavern Breakfast Casserole**

24 oz. frozen shredded hash browns, thawed between paper towels  
1/3 cup butter, melted  
1 cup shredded sharp cheddar cheese  
2 cups crumbled bacon  
3/4 cup milk  
6 large eggs

Lightly glaze a 9 X 13 inch baking pan with cooking spray. Layer hash browns in pan and brush with melted margarine. Bake 25 minutes at 425 degrees. Meanwhile, prepare bacon according to package directions and crumble. Remove hash browns from oven and sprinkle with bacon and shredded cheese.

Beat eggs and milk together, and pour over cheese and bacon. Bake at 350 degrees 15 to 20 minutes or until knife inserted in center comes out clean.

## Chapter 20

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SANDY STOOD AT HER EASEL, A teal pastel stick poised between her thumb and three fingers, as she delicately put the finishing touches on a new painting of the frozen creek in early March, bare tree limbs on either side outstretched over the water like a winter cathedral. The sky was a steely blue-grey, the sun a dim glow of foggy, buttery light.

Her studio, which had been a wraparound front porch before remodeling, featured floor-to-ceiling windows that provided her with a panoramic view of the outdoors. Each season provided its own endless display of breathtakingly beautiful scenes for her landscape paintings. Even the same scene had the potential for different paintings, she knew, depending on weather conditions, time of day, or amount of light and shadow.

It was almost dark now, and the golden-white light from the moon reflected on the trees around her house, casting long, ghostly shadows like fingers across the crusty snow. She picked up several sticks of violet-hued pastels, adding highlights and shadows to the trees on the creek, and then stood back to examine her work. She squinted to enable her to better see the light and shadows and then, with a feather-light touch, added a few more shadows of muted blue to the snow along the shoreline.

Hearing the crunch of tires on gravel, she watched in surprised delight as a black sedan made its way down the long driveway. *Bill's*

car. She quickly cleaned her purple-smudged fingers with a baby wipe and ran to the door.

She wasn't expecting him this evening, but predictably, her heart filled with joy. He had been distant lately, distracted when she spoke with him by cell phone. She knew better than to ask many questions since he was reticent to share details about his "other life" with his wife and two young daughters. Sandy was aware that the situation at home had gotten progressively worse over the past two years. Christina had been drinking more heavily than ever, he divulged on the phone one night. More often than not, she fell into a stupor by ten o'clock and slept, mouth agape, sprawled on the sofa.

"What a surprise! I didn't expect to see you until Friday," she said, flinging the door wide open to greet him.

Bill stepped out of his car, carrying an overnight bag. He looked exhausted, dark shadows visible beneath his eyes and a drawn look to his face. But then he smiled—that familiar Bill grin that never failed to stir her desire for him. Sandy was relieved to see that, despite the strain clearly visible on his face, the dimples still popped.

"I'm really glad you're here," she said, holding him tight and sniffing his cologne, a smell so familiar she could call it up in dreams.

He gave her a quick kiss, holding her tightly to him. "Got anything to drink?" he asked, the smile fading from his face.

It was then she knew. Her eyes widened as she stepped back to look at him. "Tell me. What happened?"

"I left her. I left Christina." His voice sounded hoarse, as though he were struggling for breath enough to form words.

"When did *this* happen?" Sandy's arms went immediately around his waist as they stood together in front of the studio windows.

"It was last Sunday, just after dinner. I wanted to tell you right after it happened, but I wasn't sure what I should do. I thought about asking if I could stay here a while, but that would mean not seeing my girls as much, so I found another house to lease in the same school district. That seemed best for Amy and Abby when they're with me. Christina's behavior has been so much worse lately; maybe they ought to be with me full-time."

"I'm really sorry," Sandy said, her throat tightening at the recognition of how much he was suffering.

"I'm not," Bill said bluntly. "I never loved Christina, and she certainly never loved me."

"But how will you manage with the children?"

Bill waved off the question. "I'm taking care of my girls. The best way to do that is to make things less stressful for them."

"But how can you--?"

"Christina made it clear that she preferred we continue sharing the house, but that we weren't supposed to eat dinner together with the girls anymore. Oh, and I was banished to the unfinished basement. The girls didn't understand what was going on, and Christina wouldn't talk to them about it."

"Why would she behave this way? You shouldn't have to live in the basement."

He leaned in to return her embrace, burying his face in her fragrant hair. "Actually, I think it was the part about not eating together with the girls that finally did it. That was the final straw. That's always been our special time together."

Sandy laid her head against his chest, listening to his heart beat, and willing her own wildly thumping heart to be still.

"The kids have really started to act out; Abby just started wetting the bed again. I didn't think it was right to let them think this was how fathers and mothers live together," Bill said.

Sandy heard the anguish in his voice and knew he was holding back tears. "Here, let me," she said, loosening his tie.

He unfastened the shirt buttons at his neck and raked his fingers through his hair, more noticeably grey at the temples these days. "Sandy, I know I've been unfaithful to her. I know that. I just couldn't stand this loveless marriage. I don't even *like* my own wife," he said frankly. "I guess I always knew it was just the children she wanted."

He paused and took a long sip of the scotch she handed him. "Okay, it was really only the children I wanted, too. You know that. But it's been pure hell to live with someone I don't even like, especially when I love someone else. It's always been you I loved. God, how could I have been so stupid?"

Sandy felt the pain rise like searing heat from his chest as she pressed her lips to his, kissing him again and again.

"I love you, too," she said quietly. "Let's take a bottle of wine upstairs

and curl up in front of the bedroom fireplace. We can talk a little more, if you feel up to it, and you can rest.”

She selected a bottle from the wine rack and two glasses from the corner cabinet, noting the profound weariness in Bill’s eyes.

He nodded gratefully. “That sounds good. I need to be here. I need to be with you,” he said, and then the tears came.

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From his vantage point behind the trees, Randall watched as the sleek black Infiniti made its way to the end of the lane and stopped in front of Sandy’s house. He didn’t recognize the vehicle or the man who exited with a small bag. But he felt outrage as he watched Sandy embrace him, then lead him inside her house. Randall could see her kissing the guy in plain view through her dining room window. A short time later, the lights went off downstairs, and he saw Sandy and the strange man moving about upstairs behind the shades. He saw the dim glow of firelight and watched their figures as they moved away from the window and then disappeared from sight.

Randall’s hands balled up into tight fists, and he pounded the steering wheel. Sandy Sherard, the only woman in town who refused marriage and who completely ignored him, was carrying on with a strange man in her house. He was certain he’d never seen this guy at the tavern or anywhere else around town. Randall’s face burned with fury. Obviously, Sandy Sherard wasn’t the chaste, available Christian woman he’d believed her to be.

The next morning, the black car was still parked in front of her house. Randall, who hadn’t slept at all, sat at the end of the lane unseen behind a grove of pine trees as Sandy and her lover appeared at the front door. Barefoot and dressed in a nightshirt, she kissed the man, who took a bite of toast before kissing her forehead, and then got into his car. Sandy remained on the doorstep, watching as the car backed out of her driveway. She continued waving until the man was out of sight before closing her front door. A little while later, she was at work in her studio.

Randall had been watching Sandy on-and-off for about two weeks, never observing anything out of the ordinary as she worked in her studio and went back and forth to the tavern. Now he stepped up his



vigilance. For the next several days, he posted himself as inconspicuously as possible behind the same grove of trees at the end of Sandy's lane, watching her as she worked. He had to duck down several times as students taking private lessons were delivered to her house by their parents after school and then picked up an hour later. His eyes burned as he watched Sandy work, oblivious to his presence. None of these people realized that their children were taking art classes from a harlot.

"I wonder what her brother would have to say about this?" he muttered, shifting the car into drive. He had no actual contact with Reuben, who rarely came into the tavern, except for occasional dinners with his wife. As he drove away, he outlined in his head the discussion he would have with Gil Sherard, pulling him aside in the bar to let him know his daughter's sins were putting her soul at risk of eternal damnation. But first, he wanted to approach Sandy about what he had observed. He intended to get his own kind of proof of her wanton lifestyle.

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The official first day of spring arrived with yet another heavy, wet snow and temperatures in the thirties. Spring snows rarely lasted. Compared to the frigid temperatures of earlier months, the weather felt almost balmy.

Perched on a stool at one of the counters in the tavern's kitchen, Carole Hannah took a break from cooking to type two new recipes into her laptop. She hit save and smiled at the number of completed pages. With any luck, she'd be finished by late May and could begin looking for a publisher.

Her cell phone rang out the theme song from the television show *Cheers* as she fumbled in her apron pocket for it. "Hello?" she answered on the third ring.

"Hi," Mark said. "I was just thinking about you and wanted to find out how your day is going."

"We were jammed at lunch, but it's slowed down a little since then," Carole Hannah replied. "I've been trying to get a few more recipes typed up while I prepare tonight's dinner special."

"Which is?"

"We've got beautiful tilapia filets with lemon, tomatoes, olives, and

capers. We'll offer a side of angel hair pasta with pomodoro sauce, too. I've got fresh basil from Granny Nell's greenhouse, so it'll be extra good. How's your day going?"

"Challenging," he answered cheerfully. "The students are kind of slow on the uptake, having just been God-knows-where on their spring breaks, doing God-knows-what."

Carole Hannah laughed heartily, remembering her own spring breaks when she was a student at Penn State. She and her roommates from the sorority house had driven straight through to Myrtle Beach, taking turns at the wheel. With six girls and a mountain of luggage in one hotel room, it was pandemonium. The alcohol flowed too freely those weeks, and their motto was, "*Anything we can't remember, doesn't count.*"

While his students were on spring break, Mark had more time to spend on scholarly pursuits, including a research paper he planned to publish about the Doe Run cleanup project. Mostly, though, he spent his time thinking about Carole Hannah and hoping she shared his deepening feelings. It felt too early in the relationship to ask if she wanted to spend a weekend together in Pittsburgh. And if he did, should he suggest two rooms? He decided to wait. It had been almost eighteen months since he had last made love to Kathleen, just a few nights before her death, and he needed to feel confident that he could be with Carole Hannah without fear. For weeks, he had been imagining making love to her.

In early April, he received official word from the community foundation that the challenge grant had been approved and they now had six months to raise the matching funds. Carole Hannah had never seen him so jubilant. When he saw her that evening, he kissed her soundly as other patrons at the bar cheered and made catcalls. With her rosy complexion, Carole Hannah turned beet red. She turned to find her father grinning broadly.

She realized that in a little under two months, she and Mark had become comfortable enough together that she could begin to imagine a future with him. They spoke by phone at least twice each day, and Mark usually stopped by the tavern after work to have a beer. Sometimes he stayed for dinner if he didn't have a night class. Although she had just two nights off a week, Friday and Sunday, they had been able to

enjoy a few evenings together in recent weeks, enough to convince her that Mark was a man with whom she could have a happy, committed relationship leading to marriage someday. They often took long walks together on the trail in the early mornings and became so engaged in conversation, they lost all track of time. To her surprise, Mark had even attended church service with her.

That day, they arrived a few minutes before church began and sat with Granny Nell who, Carole Hannah thought, seemed not at all surprised to see her with Mark. Sandy was conspicuously absent, having announced that she needed to be in Pittsburgh. Mark placed his arm protectively around Carole Hannah's shoulders as Reuben began speaking, just as Gil always did with Connie. Carole Hannah felt a warm glow of belonging as she relaxed into his arm.

As the organist began the offertory solo and Reuben handed out the collection plates, Carla made a beeline for Mark, smiling widely as she handed the plate to him. Carole Hannah noted the tight, thin-lipped smile on Tony's face when he accepted the plate Mark handed over to him.

It was a weekly tradition for members of the congregation to gather after the service for coffee and trays of cookies in the basement social hall. Each family took its turn providing cookies. This week, it was the Sherards who provided a lavish display of cream horns, nut rolls, miniature gobs, crispy brown sugar cookies, and apricot and raisin-filled cookies. Carla led Tony by the arm over to where Mark and Carole Hannah stood with other members of her family by the cookie table. In a voice loud enough to carry across the large room, she gushed to Connie, "I'm so happy for Carole Hannah. She's lucky to have finally found such a nice man."

Carole Hannah's cheeks turned crimson, and she wished for a fleeting moment that she could tell Carla exactly what first came to her mind. Instead, she averted her eyes and pretended not to hear her as Gil exchanged an uncomfortable glance with Connie.

Overhearing the remark, Mark cleared his throat politely. "Actually, I consider myself the lucky one that a woman as beautiful and interesting as Carole Hannah would even give me a second look."

Carla's face fell, and there was a pained expression on Tony's face as he put down his coffee cup and walked out of the hall.

After church, Mark and Carole Hannah drove Granny Nell home. During the coffee hour, Nell had managed to engineer this arrangement, telling Gil and Connie that she wanted to have tea with Mark and get to know him better.

"Oh, Lord," Gil said to Connie behind his hand.

Connie chuckled. "That's how you ended up with me."

Mark was fascinated by the expansive array of plants in Nell's greenhouse and even more impressed that she knew a practical use for each one. Nell's eyes twinkled as she proudly took Mark on a tour of her greenhouse and drying area, where an assortment of twine-tied, dried herbs hung by their stems on wood pegs. In one corner, an assortment of jewel-toned glass vials, jars, and bottles winked like gemstones in the early afternoon sunlight.

"Mrs. Sherard, I understand that you're quite knowledgeable about alternatives to traditional western medicine," Mark said. "How did you get to be such an expert?"

Granny Nell pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose and chuckled. Her granddaughter's beau was a bit stiff and formal, but she liked him, anyway. Perhaps he'd loosen up over time.

"Call me Nell," she said. "Most of what I know, I learned from my mother, who learned from her mother."

Holding up a bottle topped with an eye dropper, she said, "Most of the problems that ail folks can be treated without having to buy some expensive medicine. Those drugs usually have other side effects, too. Not that I have a problem with the drugstore," she hastened to add. "It has its place in the world. A lot of people want to try what I have to offer, though, before they spend a lot more money to see the doctor or get an expensive prescription."

"What kinds of remedies do you have here?" Mark looked curiously at the assortment of silk bags full of dried herbs, brown bottles with stoppers, and small paper bags. "This one says 'for headaches.' What's in it?"

"Paprika and peppermint...mostly," Nell said. "Natural is best. A lot of folks are surprised to find out that regular use of black pepper keeps away heartburn. You wouldn't think so, but it's true. I mix it with ginger and lemon in a tea."



She put on her apron. "Of course, you'll stay for tea and my special cookies," she said. "I insist."

Carole Hannah had a hard time containing a chuckle as Mark sat unwittingly at the kitchen table. While Nell prepared a tea tray and brewed the tea, she carried on a running commentary of herbs that were useful in overcoming common health problems.

"I can't believe you didn't learn these things in all your years of schooling," she said, shaking her head at Mark. "This is practical information about plants. What's education coming to?"

Mark flashed a toothy grin. "Maybe you should join the faculty at the university. You could teach all of us a thing or two."

Nell laughed and waved a dismissive hand at him before placing the steaming teapot and a plate of cookies on the table.

"This tea smells delicious," Mark commented. "Is it something I can buy at the store?"

Carole Hannah cleared her throat. "It's, uh, not available in any store," she said, noticing the intent look on her grandmother's face. She bit her lip to keep from laughing when Nell poured a very large cup for Mark and waved the steam in his direction. The tea was Nell's special blend of black tea, dried orange rind, and a mixture of mystery spices she kept in a special red silk bag.

"Let the tea cool for a few minutes to get the full effect of the flavors before you sweeten it," Nell urged him, passing a jar of honey across the table. She plied Mark with sugar cookies flavored with anise, insisting he have at least two. She winked at Carole Hannah, who had to look away to keep from laughing.

Later, as they walked down the trail, Mark said, "I don't mean any disrespect, but some people might say your grandmother has some unusual habits. Around here, someone like Nell could be the subject of rumors and gossip. It's a pretty conservative town."

"People say she's a witch," Carole Hannah admitted bluntly. "There's no doubt that Gran has respect and a strong understanding of other spiritual ways of believing. But what she believes and the choices she makes for her life don't easily define who she is. She's always been complicated."

Mark became quiet, and she could only hope he wasn't disturbed by what she said. But he held tightly to her hand as they walked.



"My brother wishes she'd stop doing psychic readings for people and dispensing alternative remedies. It's embarrassing for Reub to be the Presbyterian minister in town and have his own grandmother embrace what could be viewed by others with suspicion. Anything that isn't strictly taught by the church can be misunderstood, especially in a town as conservative as this one. But if you've read any religious history, the early Christian church established the celebration of Christmas at the time of the pagan celebration of winter solstice, so even Christianity is a mixture of different faith traditions."

She glanced up at Mark's expression, but he showed no sign of disapproval; he merely looked thoughtful.

"She's Scottish and Irish as so many of us are here," Carole Hannah continued, "and the Celtic tradition embraces loving the Earth and all it has to offer. To love the Earth is to love its Divine Source. She sees no contradiction between her belief in the natural world and her Presbyterian faith. To her, there is one loving, creative force that we call God."

"What you just said isn't all that weird." Mark accepted this explanation without reservation. He wasn't a religious man, he admitted, although Carole Hannah sensed that he had a deeply spiritual side evidenced by his genuine concern for the environment and his gentle, helpful nature. She already knew that he was a man who cared for others unselfishly and without judgment, and this was one of the first qualities she had come to appreciate about him.

He was also open-minded and curious about the Scottish Sight, and seemed to understand that Carole Hannah's intuition, that uncanny ability to sense what he was thinking or feeling, was a gift, rather than something for which he needed to feel suspicion.

"It's fascinating," he said. "If anyone other than you said these things to me, my education and background as a scientist would lead me to shun your comments as, well, kooky. But knowing you and the other members of your family, I've come to respect your unusual abilities. Because of the person you are, I know the source of your special gifts can't be anything other than good." He squeezed her hand.

In her entire life, Carole Hannah had never been able to be quite as honest with any man as she had been with Mark about her own and her family's unique abilities. In fact, he seemed fascinated by her simple

explanation that everyone possessed intuitive abilities, but that many people chose not to acknowledge or learn how to develop them fully.

“So, it’s science of mind and quantum theory,” he said. “There’s still so much we don’t understand about how it all works. But someday we will.”

“I don’t fully understand it, either,” she admitted. “With some of us, it’s just part of our nature. Spirituality flows even more deeply than our religious teachings, although we certainly love our faith traditions,” she explained. “Religion can be dogmatic, though, and lead people to feel marginalized. I find the traditions and rituals of the church comforting, and they do help people to understand their spiritual nature, leading them more closely to the Divine. But true spirituality doesn’t require a strictly religious belief system—just an innate understanding that we are one with each other and with the Divine. Does that make sense?”

Mark nodded, listening intently. If this knowledge was at the heart of what made this woman so incredibly loving, so ideal in his eyes, he wanted to know more.

Carole Hannah paused for a moment, trying to explain what she had understood on a deep level all of her life, but that had always been so difficult to put into words. But she tried because she knew Mark wanted to understand.

Haltingly, she began. “In each of us, there’s something that *knows*—something that’s essential to our natures and that can be awakened simply through recognition of its existence,” she said. “All of us carry the presence of God within us; we’re told we are created in His image. We often call this our soul or spirit. I believe that everyone and everything that exists—people, animals, fish, plants, even rocks and minerals—are connected by that same life force.”

She paused again, thinking of how she could best relate her inner knowing with Mark’s own experiences. “Let me try to say this in a different way. You know, as a scientist, that everything is made up of atoms. That’s the basis of all life. The great creative force behind everything we know and see and experience in this world is what we, in our various faith traditions, call God. I don’t view God as a white-haired old man sitting on a throne,” she said. “That’s an easier way to think of God, I admit. But respecting the Divine in its many natural

forms--because it is also part of each of us--and wanting to know this Divine force intimately is what I know is my spiritual nature."

"I get it," Mark said. "But how do you connect with that force and know whatever it is you're supposed to know? I don't see or hear stuff the way you do."

"Actually, you probably do and just don't know it," she said. "We all get those powerful inner urgings to say or do something, or we feel gut reactions to situations. That's intuition." As they walked back to Gran's bungalow to pick her up for dinner at Connie's and Gil's house, she explained that it was Nell who first taught her how to meditate.

"Gran taught me that when I get quiet, I'm able to listen and know what's most important, what I'm led to do in this world. Often, I get information during meditation."

"So you're told exactly what you should do?"

"I wish it were that simple," she said with a quick laugh. "It sure would make my life easier if someone would just tell me what I need to do, instead of letting me figure it out. Mostly, I see symbols or scenes that help me understand, but often not right away. Occasionally, I hear messages, but I think that's only when I'm being really dense and not comprehending the symbols in my mind's eye." She laughed and pointed to the place in the center of her forehead, between her eyes, where she typically received visual information.

"This is so cool," Mark said, shaking his head in wonder. "I've never known anyone who actually has psychic ability the way you do."

"It can be a blessing, but it comes with a lot of responsibility," she admitted. "I'm lucky to have had Gran and my dad showing me how to use the Sight all these years. The most important thing is to make every effort to make sure our words and actions are based in love and pure intent. Even with the Sight, life isn't always easy because we all have our own lessons to learn. But faith is about believing that everything will turn out fine. There's a more intelligent source of everything that exists and that is possible, and we just need to be in that flow of good to tap into it."

Mark felt deep emotion welling up inside--something strong and utterly familiar. But this time, it wasn't pain. He took in a deep breath as a wonderful sensation of pure joy seemed to lift his feet from the trail and carry him forward. He caught the scent of Carole Hannah's

lavender shampoo, and it brought him back to his senses. He realized at that moment that he was deeply in love with her. He took her small hand and raised it to his lips, unable to say a word, fearful and yet hopeful that she already knew his thoughts. And she did.

## **Lemon Tilapia with Tomatoes, Olives, and Capers**

2 pounds tilapia filets (or other mild white fish)  
1 cup dry white table wine  
3 medium ripe tomatoes, diced and seeded  
8 pitted green olives, sliced  
8 pitted kalamata olives, sliced  
15 capers  
1 medium lemon, zest cut into long, thin strips with the juice  
1 tbsp. extra virgin olive oil  
1/4 tsp. freshly-ground pepper  
3 cloves garlic, minced  
1/4 cup fresh Italian flat-leaf parsley, chopped

Mix together tomatoes, olives, olive oil, lemon zest strips, capers, and garlic; set aside for flavors to blend. Place fish filets side by side in a large, deep skillet. Pour wine and lemon juice over fish to reach halfway up side of pan. Cook fish over medium-high heat until it is fully cooked through and begins to flake easily, about 10 to 15 minutes. Gently remove fish onto another plate. Cool cooking liquid and freeze for a future use or discard.

Over medium heat, warm tomato mixture in skillet; arrange fish on top. Cover and cook for 10 minutes.

Divide the fish onto four plates and spoon the tomato mixture over the top. Garnish with parsley and serve.



## Chapter 21

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**A**S HEAVY APRIL SHOWERS EVOLVED INTO warmer temperatures, Mark and Carole Hannah spent more time together, attending a symphony concert, two movies, and a faculty dinner party at the university for members of the math and science departments. They also worked to prepare a presentation to the civic council and the canoe club about the acid mine remediation fundraising campaign. This entailed the creation of handouts and a response form for gift requests. It was after this work session that the inevitable happened.

They were at Mark's house, located high on a hill above Doe Run. Mark set a cheery blaze in the fireplace as Carole Hannah walked around the first floor, admiring the gleaming hardwood floors and expansive windows of the open floor plan. The house had been built in the early 1990s by a local architect who died shortly after construction was completed. Mark and his family were the first people to live there.

Kathleen's personality and creative handiwork were clearly visible in the hand-painted tiles on the kitchen backsplash and finely-stitched, embroidered hand towels in the powder room. There was a distinctly feminine touch to every room, yet Carole Hannah didn't feel uncomfortable being in another woman's home. She clearly sensed Kathleen's presence in the house, but rather than feeling threatened or uncomfortable, she felt that Kathleen welcomed and approved of her being there.

They sat at the spacious dining room table, a pot of coffee and a plate of Althea's warm sticky buns between them. The goal tonight was to

identify as many potential large donors for the water cleanup campaign as possible and assign solicitor teams.

As Carole Hannah looked off into space, balancing her pencil between two fingers, she thought of people she knew or businesses in the area that might give or pledge larger gifts. Within a few moments, she caught Mark looking at her intently.

"What?" She smiled slightly, tilting her head. "Did I forget someone?"

He grinned. "I did."

"Who did you forget?" Her eyes opened wide when she noticed the look on his face, a look that told her he had lost all interest in the subject at hand.

"I forgot to tell you how beautiful you are."

"Oh." She colored deeply. "Thanks."

"Why don't I get a bottle of wine, and we can move over by the fireplace?" He stood and placed his hands on her shoulders, then leaned over to kiss the place where her neck met her collarbone. Carole Hannah's eyes opened wide, and goose bumps rose on her skin from the firmness of his touch on her shoulders.

Mark brought two wineglasses and a bottle of pinot noir from the kitchen; then he motioned with his head for her to follow him. While she stood by the window, looking out at the star-studded night sky, he stoked the fire until it roared. Now she felt him behind her, his arms around her at the waist, as she rested her head back against his chest, feeling his warm breath on her hair. He turned her around so that she faced him and kissed her deeply as her arms encircled his neck. For all the seriousness of his nature, Mark was a passionate man who understood how she liked to be kissed and touched. Although they hadn't yet made love, Carole Hannah sensed that was about to change.

He led her over to the white shag rug in front of the fireplace and tossed several big cushions on the floor. "Lay down with me?" he asked simply. She followed his lead, stretching out on the floor as they continued kissing.

Without a word, Mark began unbuttoning the pearls on her cashmere sweater. They faced each other in the firelight, continuing to kiss as he undressed her slowly. He was still fully clothed, yet Carole Hannah didn't feel embarrassed as he admired her body in the firelight.

"I want you so much," he said before shedding his own clothes. Their hands continued exploring one another until Mark gently moved against her.

She raised her hips to meet him and let out a small sound of ecstasy. It had been so long since a man had made love to her, she took in a deep breath, feeling awe at the way Mark seemed to already know how to touch her, when to move this way or that. All of her senses were heightened now, and she savored him as though she had known him before and they were reunited. In a moment of utter clarity, she knew that somewhere in time, they had already been lovers.

Afterward, as they lay in the darkness, the fireplace embers spent but still glowing, she moved closer to him, head resting in the crook of his underarm, her breasts pressed comfortably against his ribcage. The pads of her fingers idly traced the soft, smooth skin of his hips and belly. Neither of them spoke, although a stream of thoughts raced through her head at the newness of being with him, especially here in this house.

"I love you," he said suddenly.

She felt his breath catch. At first, she wasn't sure she'd heard him correctly and slowly raised herself up, leaning on one elbow to look into his eyes. She saw the tears coursing down the side of his temples and kissed them away, knowing instinctively that they were healing tears.

Now she spoke the words that came naturally. "I've waited so long for you."

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By the end of April, residents of Walkers Corner bemoaned ever seeing sunshine again. It rained every day, often hours at a time, and Doe Run was running high and fast. With the status of the creek on everyone's lips these days, it was the ideal time to set the fundraising campaign into motion by meeting with those who would request donations from others. Following a short video of the history of Doe Run, Mark planned to talk about the next phase of the cleanup project and how much time was needed to complete the work. Then Carole Hannah would speak about fundraising solicitations and how success could be achieved in the shortest time possible. The meeting was scheduled for the next evening at the fire hall.

In advance of this meeting, Carole Hannah made her personal

commitment of \$2,500, which she intended to pay over two years. Mark matched her gift. Then she asked a number of community leaders for their gifts, including her parents and Tony. After talking it over, Gil and Connie pledged \$15,000 jointly from their personal funds and from the business. Tony matched Carole Hannah's gift with an immediate personal check for \$5,000, promising \$25,000 as his company's total commitment for the project.

Carole Hannah was overjoyed and sprang from the chair across from his desk to hug him. "Thank you, Tony! I knew I could count on you!" she said, her face beaming.

"Always," he said quietly, feeling her arms around him and the loving vibration she exuded in her touch. Little did she know he would have given her anything she wanted, everything he owned.

Having made their own gift commitments, Tony and Gil, who were experienced volunteer fundraisers from many years of community campaigns, promised Carole Hannah they would get on the phones with their vendors and suppliers. Sensing that the quiet phase of the campaign was well underway, Carole Hannah was confident that they would meet with success in the six-month timeframe.

At the meeting, members of the civic council and canoe club listened attentively as Mark provided a concise overview of the Doe Run water cleanup project and how it had positively impacted the community's health and safety, quality of life, and the local economy.

He beckoned to Carole Hannah, and she rose to make her way to the podium. Looking around at people she had known all of her life, she said, "The quiet phase of the campaign, as we call it, has been underway for about two weeks, and we're doing amazingly well."

She announced several of the lead gifts to loud applause and a few appreciative whistles. "I'd like to thank Gene MacDuff, president of Laurel Woods Bank, for his willingness to provide a line of credit until all the gift commitments are received."

As Carole Hannah confidently outlined the path to fundraising success, Tony sat in a corner, watching her speak. Tucking her hair behind one ear in that unconscious way he had always loved, she explained that now was the time for everyone to make their personal commitments and to be willing to ask others. After seventy percent of the funds or pledges were in hand, she explained, the campaign would



be announced to the general public with a goal of securing the entire amount from all other contributors.

"And yes," she said smiling as three hands shot up in unison, "the guild should plan to hold a quilt raffle. With any luck, we'll have all the money by July, and the project can begin no later than August. It's important to finish the work before the coldest weather arrives."

Mark joined her at the podium as she finished speaking. "With the gifts and pledges already in hand, we need another \$42,000, and then we'll get the matching money from the community foundation. Let's keep in mind that it'll be much easier to ask others to give to our project after we've all made our own thoughtful, generous gifts."

She handed out information about giving opportunities, along with envelopes, and said, "For those who wish to make larger gifts from stock or other appreciated assets and aren't sure how to do it, don't hesitate to ask me. And remember, you can pledge over three years, thanks to Laurel Woods Bank. You also may want to make gifts in memory or in honor of others, and we'll recognize those in a special way. Jake Campbell has offered to build benches along the trail for us, and he'll engrave them, too. Thank you all in advance for your support."

She glanced over at Tony and sat down, already confident of success.

"Now that Doe Run is being restored to its former condition, we have a legitimate tourist industry here," Mark said. "It's no coincidence that your businesses are growing more successful as people visit our community year round. Other services will be needed, too, when more visitors enjoy the recreational opportunities this area has to offer. New businesses are opening up and will want to hire locals. Let's remember that all ships rise. Your children and grandchildren, who have had to move away, soon will have many opportunities to live and work here. Let's make sure with the second phase of this project that we set the stage for an even bigger and better Walkers Corner."

There was a burst of applause as Mark raised his hand once more for silence. "Before we go our separate ways tonight," he said, "I'd like to express special thanks to Carole Hannah Sherard for her hard work and generous support of this project. Carole Hannah was instrumental in writing the grant that we've been awarded. We're lucky to have her back in this community, and I want to thank her publicly. Please call



on her if you need any assistance. Now let's get out there and raise some serious money!"

After the meeting, many people stayed to talk with Carole Hannah about friends and family members they thought could be asked for gifts. She took careful notes, asking each person if they were willing to make the request themselves and if they required assistance. Mark stood quietly by, watching with pride.

From across the room, Tony stood and walked quickly to the door. He glanced back at Carole Hannah, who looked up at that moment to meet his eyes. There she saw a storm brewing.

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That night, after Randall Shelby had his dinner and two beers at the tavern, he headed over to watch Sandy work in her studio. She hadn't been at the tavern in two nights, and he was suspicious about the reason for her absence. There hadn't been another night visit by the strange man, at least that he had noticed, leading Randall to theorize that the guy might even have been a one-time customer, perhaps one of many. Surely, the woman's art sales didn't provide enough for her to have such a nice house.

Sandy sipped a mug of chamomile tea flavored with honey while she catalogued new paintings in preparation for her June exhibit in Pittsburgh. With any luck, this year's show would be as successful as one a few years earlier, when she had sold over half of her larger works and all of her smaller pieces. Today, she had spent hours matting and framing several new paintings, in addition to teaching regular classes. Bone-tired after fourteen hours of non-stop work, she stretched her arms over her head and bent over from side to side to loosen her back and neck muscles.

Randall popped a breath mint into his mouth and peered into his wallet. There were three twenties and a ten. If Sandy Sherard wasn't fit to be his bride, she was certainly good enough to service his needs. The rain had subsided for a few hours as he slowly drove his car down the muddy lane and parked in her driveway. Sandy peered out, not recognizing the car. She wondered if Bill was driving a company vehicle and started for the door. Without thinking, she opened it and was horrified to see Randall bounding up the front steps.

"Randy, what in the world...? What are you doing here? It's too late for a social visit," she said coldly, trying to keep the door mostly closed with her shoulder. Something in his eyes was distinctly threatening.

"Oh now, Sandy, that's not very nice," Randall said. "I'm one of your good customers, and I always tip well."

"What do you want?" Sandy asked bluntly, fire in her eyes.

"I want what you gave that other guy who was here," Randall said. He inserted his hand through the opening of the door. Sandy tried to slam it, but he was too quick. Forcing open the door, he grabbed her arm and pulled her toward him. She screamed at him to stop, raising her arms and hitting him with all her strength as Randall pushed her backward against the wall. The more she fought, the stronger he became. Sandy recognized with a stab of fear that his anger and desire were fueled by her reaction. The more she resisted, the more danger she felt from his movements.

She tried to speak reasonably to him. "Randy, this isn't like you. You're usually such a gentleman."

He was still holding tightly to her shoulders, trying to kiss her. "I'm a gentleman, but you're no lady." With one jerk, he ripped the top two metal buttons off Sandy's grey wool sweater. "Who *was* that guy who came to your house? I want whatever you gave him."

"He and I have been together a long time. Randy, stop!" Sandy felt a sharp pain in her neck when Randall yanked her head back by her French braid.

She fought as hard as she could and then tried to run, but succeeded only in tripping, nearly bringing Randall down on top of her. He spun her around in an attempt to push her onto the overstuffed sofa. Sandy reached for the arm of a chair to keep her balance.

"You're wrong about me!" she said. "Whatever you think, you're wrong! Randy, why are you behaving this way? You're either drunk or out of your mind! Get out!"

Now Randall began jerking his belt loose as he tightened his grip on Sandy's arm. She reached behind him and grabbed the box-cutter she had been using to cut foam board. With one last burst of strength, she slashed Randall across the face with the razor-sharp blade, crying out with the exertion.

He howled in pain and sprang backward, giving her a wide berth

as rivulets of blood sprang from between his splayed fingers. He cursed Sandy, invoking God's name as she flung open the front door and ran as fast as her stocking feet could carry her across the driveway and into the forest. She was afraid to take the main road in case Randall tried to run her down with his car.

Carole Hannah was sitting quietly by the fireplace reading a novel when she suddenly got a frightening vision of Sandy, white-faced and screaming, fighting for her life. Jumping to her feet, Carole Hannah grabbed her coat and car keys.

"Let's go!" she called out. Florabelle followed her out of the house and jumped into the front passenger seat as Carole Hannah gunned the engine. She drove as fast as she could to Sandy's house about three miles down the road. From a distance, she saw lights on in Sandy's studio and the front door wide open.

With her heart in her throat, chest pounding in fear, Carole Hannah screeched to a stop in front of the house and opened her car door. Florabelle jumped out after her and took off straight for the woods, her baying barks echoing in the night.

Frantic with fear and uncertain about whether to run into the woods after Florabelle or continue looking for Sandy in the house, she called out to her sister repeatedly, but there was no answer. Carole Hannah looked down and saw a trail of blood that led from the studio floor, down the steps, and ended beside muddy tire tracks. Was it Sandy who was bleeding? She did a quick search of each room in the house, then got into her car and drove back onto the highway to the only place she could think to go: Terry Macdonald's house at the edge of the forest.

Sandy continued running through the moonlit woods, barely aware of her cold, wet feet as she covered the next half-mile. She stumbled once over a log and nearly fell, but righted herself quickly, fearing that Randall, now even more enraged by his injury, would catch up with her. She could hear a dog howling, coming closer, and prayed it wasn't a stray. Gasping for breath and barely able to form coherent words as she frantically prayed for help, Sandy felt ready to collapse by the time she saw the lights of Terry's house.

Suddenly, she felt a presence hurtling forward next to her and saw that it was Florabelle, guiding her through the woods. "Florabelle!" Sandy cried out breathlessly as she fought to keep going. Her legs

were wobbling, but now as she approached the clearing, she saw Carole Hannah, who held out her arms and caught her sister in a tight embrace.

"He's coming!" Sandy cried. "We have to get in the house!"

"Who's coming?" Carole Hannah asked fearfully, but then the man's face appeared in her mind. *Randall Shelby*.

"Terry, let us in!" Carole Hannah yelled as she pounded on the front door, holding Sandy's arm while she struggled to catch her breath. The porch light came on as Carole Hannah continued to plead, "Terry, open up! Please hurry!"

Terry opened the front door and gasped. "Oh my God, what happened?"

She took Sandy's arm as Carole Hannah supported her sister on the other side. They led Sandy to the sofa, and Terry covered her with an afghan. Florabelle sat down on the floor next to Sandy.

"Terry, lock your door. He's coming!" Sandy cried, her breath coming in gasps now.

"Who's coming, honey?" Terry asked, but she quickly complied.

"It's Randall," Carole Hannah answered. "Something terrible happened."

Terry's eyes opened wide and she lowered herself to the sofa beside Sandy, holding her tightly until her friend's breathing stabilized and she was able to speak coherently. Meanwhile, Carole Hannah grabbed a bottle of brandy and poured a small glass, placing it in Sandy's cold hands as she listened to her sister's account of what happened.

"He attacked me, so I slashed him with a box-cutter," Sandy explained. "I think I really hurt him; there was so much blood. I don't know where he went after I ran into the woods."

Suddenly all the color drained from her face. Terry took the brandy glass and forced Sandy's head between her knees while Carole Hannah dialed nine-one-one. Soon, they heard a siren in the distance.

Sheriff Jim Mitchell arrived first, followed by police from a neighboring borough. Sandy told them what happened and how she managed to escape.

"He was bleeding so much; I got scared and ran out."

A police officer took photos of the bruises on Sandy's neck and arms,



noting the missing buttons on her sweater. Then the other officers left to investigate the scene of the crime.

"Do you want to go to the hospital?" the sheriff asked. "It's a good idea to get checked over."

"No," Sandy said firmly. "I'll be okay. I don't want to go back to my house tonight, though."

"I'll keep her at my home," Carole Hannah assured the sheriff. She felt certain that they'd be safe with Florabelle continuing her watch.

The sheriff radioed another squad car to pick up Randall. "I'm guessing he's at either Indiana or Westmoreland regional hospital by now, if he isn't at home," he told the women. "He couldn't have gotten far if he was bleeding that badly. I'll go over to your place, Sandy, and make sure we've gotten all the evidence. Do you have your key?"

"No, I left it on the hall table."

"I'll lock up the house and bring your key back over," he said. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm doing much better now. Thanks," Sandy mumbled as she sipped the brandy.

Terry had been silent the entire time the sheriff questioned Sandy. Now she spoke up. "I need to tell you something, Jim. In March, I had a problem with Randy outside the tavern."

"You did?" Carole Hannah's face turned pale. "When?"

"That night that you and I talked in the kitchen."

"Oh my God, Terry; I knew I should have waited for you."

"Cee, I mean it; I really can't handle you blaming yourself, okay? I didn't report it because, well, I guess I didn't want anyone to know what happened. I felt stupid and embarrassed about it."

Sheriff Mitchell raised his eyebrows. "Anything you can tell me will help with the investigation."

Terry took a deep breath and looked directly at Sandy. "I'm sorry, Sandy. If I had known this could happen, I swear I would've said something sooner."

She turned to face the sheriff. "I was leaving the tavern after playing there with my band. I was parked behind this big pile of snow, but I didn't see or hear anyone coming. I was about to get into my car when I felt a hand on my shoulder, and when I turned around, it was Randy; I mean, Reverend Shelby. He pushed me against the car and started



kissing me. I slapped him and then he shook me really hard, and I lost my balance. He banged my head against the car window and pulled my arm behind my back, too.” She grimaced at the memory. “I tried to kick him, but he moved away too fast. But then, I was able to get into my car and drive away.”

“I wish you had called me when this happened, Terry,” Sheriff Mitchell said gruffly. “Do you remember what he said to you during the assault?”

Terry repeated Randall’s abusive comments. “I should have said something right after it happened,” she admitted. “But I just wanted to forget the whole thing, and I didn’t want anyone to feel bad that it happened. I also didn’t want people talking about me like...before. But if I had told someone, maybe Sandy would have known what he was capable of doing.”

“Well, he’ll be picked up tonight, either at the hospital or at his home; you can be sure of that,” the sheriff said. “We’ll need you to come to the station, at some point, Sandy—and you, too, Terry. But I think we’ll let you both rest tonight. Keep your doors locked, both of you, just in case. Call if anything else happens.”

“Cee, why don’t you and Sandy stay here tonight?” Terry said. “It won’t exactly be a pajama party, but at least none of us will be alone.”

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By this time, Randall was on a gurney in the emergency room, with a physician tending to the deep laceration on his left cheek. The blade had pierced layers of skin, facial muscles, and nerves. The ER doctor noted on the chart that the patient was reluctant to supply details of how the injury occurred. Even when Randall was informed about the extent of his injury, he asked that the wound be stitched up as quickly as possible so he could be on his way.

“I have some things to straighten out,” he said. “There are people who need to be told what happened to me tonight.”

The doctor shook his head. “With the severity of the wound, a plastic surgeon will have to perform surgery so the facial muscles and nerves heal properly and you don’t end up with a nasty scar or worse. You’ll need to be admitted.”

Randall reluctantly agreed. He wanted as little evidence as possible,

and an ugly scar was sure to hurt his reputation. He stared at the ceiling tiles in the cubicle, wondering where Sandy had gone after she left her house while he planned how he would explain his injury to others. On one point, he was clear: that the incident happened as a result of Sandy's sins and that this was the only defense he would need. He was a minister, after all. No one was likely to believe a woman's story over his.

He lay back with a self-satisfied half-smile as the perfect account of the night's events formed in his mind. He decided to simply explain that he stopped by Sandy's house after seeing suspicious behavior there recently. After all, strange men came and went at odd hours. Sandy reacted badly to the unexpected visit—no doubt, expecting another man, instead of a minister. She certainly wouldn't want her parents to hear from a man of God and one of their best customers about her late-night activities. After they exchanged angry words, Sandy attacked him with her fists and then inexplicably sliced his face and ran into the forest.

The curtain separated, and two uniformed officers appeared. Behind them was the sheriff, who read Randall his rights.

"I'm a minister! You can't treat me like a common criminal," Randall objected.

"Not one, but two women, Sandy Sherard and Terry Macdonald, are filing charges against you for assault."

Randall launched into a tirade against Sandy as he began explaining his side of the story. "They're friends! Of course Terry Macdonald is taking her side!"

Sheriff Mitchell looked directly into Randall's eyes. "There are two women, not one, involved in this complaint, Reverend. As part of my investigation, I'm also going to do a background check to see if anything like this has happened in the past."

Randall remembered the police report filed by his first wife, then the restraining order filed by his second wife, and felt sick to his stomach. A security guard was assigned to watch him until he was released into the sheriff's custody. He was arraigned the next day in front of the district magistrate.

By the end of the week, the Reverend Randall Shelby was in jail, and members of the Holy Ghost Church of Love had lost their pastor.

## **Chicken Limonata**

2 skinless boneless chicken breasts or 4 chicken filets  
3 tbsp. whole-wheat flour  
1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil  
4 tbsp. unsalted butter, melted  
1/3 cup dry white wine  
1/2 cup chicken broth  
Juice of one large lemon  
15 capers  
Fresh ground black pepper

Place chicken breasts between two large sheets of waxed paper, and pound with a meat tenderizer until flattened. Sprinkle chicken with salt and pepper, and dredge in flour. Over medium-high heat, melt butter with olive oil. Place chicken in skillet and brown on both sides.

Mix melted butter, wine, chicken broth, lemon juice and capers and pour over chicken. Simmer chicken in broth until tender and fully cooked. Garnish with parsley, and serve warm with pan juices drizzled over chicken.

## Chapter 22

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MAY BROUGHT UNSEASONABLY WARM TEMPERATURES AND even more torrential downpours that melted all remaining snow in the mountains and caused hundreds of basements to flood. Emergency measures were now in place as Doe Run ran fast and deep, swollen above capacity from all of the rain and runoff flowing down its banks.

Nell Sherard, wrapped in a shawl, sat alone in her living room as she quieted herself for meditation. She could hear the metallic tap-tap-tap of rain on the roof and feel the vibrations of dull thunder in her chest as she began to breathe slowly and deeply.

Having lived on Doe Run for seventy-five years, she remained unconcerned as water swelled over the shoreline and crossed the trail into her front yard. This, too, would pass. Doe Run rose and fell each year with the same reassuring ebb and flow as ocean waves hit the shoreline and retreated. This year was a little worse than usual, but as the seasons changed, spring to summer to fall to winter, the creek always returned to its normal state in the same predictable manner. One had only to wait and trust in the wisdom of Mother Nature.

She opened a vial of lavender oil and touched it to the crown of her head, forehead, throat, and heart, inhaling deeply as she began to breathe, entering a meditative state. There, she talked with family and friends who had crossed over. Her husband, Joe, who had been gone for over thirty years, was still a frequent visitor, often giving her helpful messages that were comforting or instructive. He came to her

more frequently these days, and she had only to get quiet and think of him to bring his presence nearer. She knew he was waiting for her, just as she was waiting and longing to be with him again, and she had ultimate faith that he would be there to help her cross over when her time came.

“Creek’s rising fast, Joe,” she told him. “But I guess you already know that. Remember when we used to put sandbags around the foundation of the house, just in case? Any idea how bad it’s gonna get this time?”

She could see him coming toward her in his favorite plaid flannel shirt and corduroy pants, telling her to go upstairs to the second floor. Yes, that was good advice, she decided. Nell went upstairs to her bedroom, put on warm clothing, and crawled under their old quilt.

“Yes, dear, this time I’ll go,” she promised, when Joe instructed her to wait for the help that was on its way.

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Tony Whittaker prided himself on making quick business decisions and following through promptly. This did not extend to his personal life, however, as proven by his inability to decide whether or not to marry his fiancée. It had been four nights since Carla told him they needed to set a wedding date or the engagement was off. He had yet to give her an answer.

On the evening of Carla’s ultimatum, he had arrived home from work with no other plan in mind than to eat a fast supper and hit the weights at the gym. He thought maybe later he’d stop at the tavern on the way home and see if anyone was around. His first sign that the evening might have something else in store was when he noticed the dining room table set with Carla’s good bone china and two long white candles in crystal candlesticks. Fresh flowers were lovingly arranged in a matching crystal vase, and Carla wore her best navy dress and the pearls he had given her their first Christmas together. She kissed the top of his head as she set the dinner plate in front of him.

“You look nice. How was your day?” he asked, trying not to sound as if he had noticed anything out of the ordinary. “Man, this sure is a puny little chicken.” He laughed weakly at his own joke as he picked up his knife and fork to cut into the Cornish game hen.



Carla folded her arms across her ample chest. "Tony, it's time. We need to set a date for the wedding."

Tony promptly lost his appetite. Jerking his hand back and scattering wild rice pilaf across the tablecloth, he looked at her disbelievingly. "Carla, things are fine with us the way they are. Don't I give you everything you want?"

"You're a very good provider, Tony," Carla said, sitting down in the chair across from him. "I have no complaints about that. But I want to be married," she said stubbornly. "We've been engaged for three years, and everyone is wondering why we aren't married. *I'm* wondering why we aren't married. If you can't commit to a wedding date, this engagement is over. I mean it, Tony."

"You know how nervous I get about marriage. Why do we need a piece of paper?" Tony could hear the pleading tone in his voice and hated himself for it. "There's something about making things legal that causes relationships to fall apart."

He realized that this was his chance to take a stand and tell her he didn't want to get married, simply letting Carla be the one to end the relationship. All he had to do was refuse her. But the words caught in his throat. He hadn't expected this—not tonight. Pushing his plate away, he stood up. "I can't talk about this anymore tonight," he said, heading for the door.

"Where are you going?" Carla demanded, and then answered herself softly, "As if I didn't know."

"Out," he said. "Don't wait up."

He drove around for a half-hour, fighting the thoughts that paraded like storm troopers through his brain, thoughts that did nothing to ease the growing awareness that he was deeply unhappy with Carla. He half-hoped she'd already be gone by the time he got home, but knew that was unlikely.

It was nearing seven thirty when he arrived at the tavern. Parking in the side lot, he looked hopefully for Carole Hannah's car, even though he knew she probably wouldn't be working at this hour. She might even be with Mark; it was obvious that they were becoming more serious. Panic, followed by heavy regret, flooded through him, and he laid his forehead on the steering wheel, wishing someone would tell him what to do.

From the time he was a child, he had always done what was expected of him: abandoning his dreams of college to work in the family business, marrying Nora when she got pregnant, bringing home a good paycheck, and being the best father he knew how to be. And what had it gotten him? Now he was expected to marry Carla because other people thought it was the right thing for him to do. This time, though, his heart was telling him it was a mistake to continue to live a lie. But without a promise from Carole Hannah that she would be there for a soft place to land, what would happen if he left the home he shared with Carla? Would he be alone again?

Entering the tavern, he grabbed one of the corner barstools, watching as Gil rushed back and forth between customers at the bar and tables.

"Hey there, Gil; looks like you've got your hands full tonight."

"Eh yah," Gil answered as he hustled four bottles of Yuengling to a booth in the corner. "Be back in just a minute, Tony. Lost my daughter as a bartender for a while, I'm afraid," he said.

Like everyone else in town, Tony had heard what happened to Sandy and Terry. "What happened out at Sandy's place sure was awful," he commented, shaking his head. "I always knew there was something sick about that Randall, but I never thought a preacher would act that way."

"Randall has some demons; we don't have to wonder about that anymore," Gil remarked flatly as he returned to the bar and handed Tony a menu. He poured the usual Dewar's on the rocks, although Tony hadn't yet asked for it. "I guess you're ready for this," he said.

Tony reached for the glass and took a long gulp.

Gil set a plate of snacks in front of him. "Don't drink like that on an empty stomach, boy. Here, try these; Carole Hannah came up with 'em today. The dip there is made from cannellini beans, and the pita chips have a little red pepper. They go pretty good together." He returned to washing glasses in the sink behind the bar.

Tony spread bean dip onto a pita chip and let out a big sigh. His stomach rumbled, and he remembered that he hadn't eaten a bite of his dinner.

"How are you tonight?" Gil asked nonchalantly, glancing up from the sink.

"I've been better," Tony answered. He offered a wan smile, shook

his head, and shrugged. "Carla wants us to set a date for the wedding. Guess I need to give in and let her do it."

Gil raised his eyebrows and bit his upper lip, but Tony, who was engrossed in peeling a beer coaster from its backing, didn't notice.

"Can't say I'm really ready to get married," he admitted. "But I guess it's time to stop with the cold feet and give her what she wants. If you aren't moving forward, you're moving backward, right?"

"Ah, the cold feet," Gil said knowingly. "There are always lots of things to worry about when you're talking about marriage. Sometimes, though, what we think we fear most isn't what's really at the heart of the matter."

"Yeah, maybe," Tony answered and started in on another coaster. "We can't have everything we want in life." *Or everyone*, he thought.

Gil placed both soapy hands on the bar in front of him. "Maybe there's something else that's bothering you about the whole thing," he suggested. "Then again, what do I know? Maybe you're worrying for nothing. I guess all you can do is ask yourself what's the worst thing that can happen, and then make your decision. If you love the woman, seems like you'll do the right thing."

Tony stared into space. "I guess you're right. That's something I ought to know by now."

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That night, before crawling into bed, Gil turned on the police scanner he kept on an end table in the living room. All day, he had felt uneasy, but couldn't get a clear feeling or message. He'd get quiet for a few moments and listen, waiting for someone to come through, but no one did. He began to wonder what was wrong. He already knew that sometimes the intuitive messages would stop if there was nothing he could do about a situation or if someone else needed to take action. Sometimes he was not the one intended to know what was going to happen.

He worried that his mother would wait too long to leave her house if the water got too high on the property. Just yesterday, when he had stopped by on the back road, the creek was lapping against the trail on the shoreline.

Not surprisingly, Nell refused to leave. "It was this way in fifty-

three and again in seventy-two and eighty-six," she said, waving away his concerns. "I'd rather stay put. I'm too old to leave every dern time it rains like this."

"Mother, you need to be safe," he said in frustration. "I can't have you out here alone with this kind of danger. Don't make me carry you out of here over my shoulder. You're not the only one who's old, you know."

"Oh, son, leave me be," she said wearily.

Emergency service exchanges were busy tonight as police and firefighters answered calls for everything from electrical problems caused by flooding basements to cars that were swept off bridges by swiftly flowing water. People could be foolish about driving into rushing water, often with tragic consequences. Gil knew the creek was rising even more with the additional heavy rain. He decided first thing in the morning to call and insist his mother leave the house until the danger had passed. Nell could be stubborn as the dickens about leaving her precious plants. Fortunately, so far, the water had never made it the whole way into the house.

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As he graded freshmen test papers, Mark nervously listened to the radio and guessed that the university, with its large commuter student population, might have to cancel classes tomorrow. His home atop Laurel View Road afforded him a wide view of the valley below, and he had become alarmed at the breadth of Doe Run as he looked out his living room window that morning. Light rain continued to fall steadily throughout the day, and he was forced to take an alternate route home from work to avoid a small bridge that was under water. There was no doubt that Carole Hannah would have difficulty getting to work in the morning if the flooding kept up on the main road.

He suddenly felt an anxious, sick feeling in the pit of his stomach as he thought of Nell so far out on the trail. He already knew from Carole Hannah that Nell was reluctant to leave her home. He decided he'd check on her at first light.

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Early the next morning, just before daybreak as Carole Hannah



watched the early morning weather and news, she tried several times to reach Granny Nell. Gran's phone rang and rang, but even the message machine didn't pick up, meaning the tape was already full. Despite concentrating several times throughout the long night, Carole Hannah hadn't gotten any helpful insights. Why was the Sight failing her at such a critical time? She wondered if her own fears were blocking her ability to receive insights and tried to alter her negative emotions. *Breathe*. Closing her eyes, she tried again to envision Gran's house, without success. With a sudden flash of insight, she realized that it was more likely that she was not the one to receive the message.

When her own phone rang, she jumped in alarm. Mark's name came up on caller i.d.

"Hello?" she answered, her stomach lurching violently.

"Cee, I'm glad you're up," Mark said. "We need to go out on the trail and make sure your grandmother is safe."

"From what I'm seeing on the news, the water has to be all the way on her property by now," she said.

"I don't want to scare you, but I'm guessing the water is probably level with her front porch and that her first floor has water by now," Mark said. "She'd know enough to go to the second floor, but there could be other problems when the creek is this high. Hurry and get dressed. I've already got my big canoe on the roof rack."

"Let me put on some boots and rain gear and find my life jacket. I'm going to grab the first aid kit and a blanket, too."

"I've got Kathleen's life jacket, which I think will fit Nell," Mark said. "Frankly, this isn't a good idea without help from emergency services, but I have a strong feeling it's important to go now. It'll take the water rescue squad too long to respond. Cee, when we get to her house, you'll have to convince her to come with us in the boat."

Mark arrived about fifteen minutes later, already wearing his wet suit, and Carole Hannah rushed out to meet him.

"I think with both of us paddling, we can do this," he said. "The creek is running fast, but with the added depth, there's less white water."

As they got into Mark's SUV, Mark dialed nine-one-one on his cell phone and informed the dispatcher they were heading out to check on Nell Sherard. "I've got a canoe to transport her to safety," he said.



"That's not a good idea," the female dispatcher said. "Dr. Baker, stay home. I'll let the sheriff know you're worried and have someone check on Nell first chance."

"Thanks," Mark said and hung up. He turned to Carole Hannah. "I can promise you they won't check on her anytime soon. They're too busy," he said matter-of-factly. "If there was any lightning, believe me, I wouldn't attempt this."

"I'm not sure how strong of a paddler I am, but I say, let's go."

It was fully daylight now, but the sky was dark and threatening, with clouds that roiled ominously. They looked up warily at the sky and then at each other. Heavy rain continued to fall steadily as Carole Hannah and Mark approached a spot in the road that was still safely above water level. Nevertheless, Nell's bungalow was still about a half-mile downstream.

"I'm trying to park as close as possible to the house so we won't need to be on the creek any longer than necessary," he said. "I've never seen it like this."

As they got out of Mark's Subaru Outback, their hearts fell at the scene before them.

"This is as far as we can go by vehicle. Let's take the canoe down and carry it from here. Put on that life jacket now, just in case. I'm also putting some inner tubes in the boat with us."

Carole Hannah's teeth chattered with cold and fear while she fastened on the life jacket. She helped Mark take the boat off the roof rack, feeling sharp pains in her hands and wrists as they lugged the heavy canoe to the water's edge. Her stomach vaulted again when she realized that if the water was this high, Mark was right: the water was well over Granny Nell's front porch by now and probably several inches deep in the house. By now, even the back road was under water.

Mark held the boat steady while Carole Hannah clambered in. With the canoe rocking violently back and forth in the swift water, he got in behind her and began expertly steering.

She had never canoed in water running this fast and was dismayed at how difficult it was to keep the canoe on course. Her arms were already burning with exertion, and she wondered how long she could keep up this much effort.

"Don't paddle unless the canoe moves too far in either direction,"

Mark advised. "Go with the flow, Carole Hannah. Otherwise, you'll exert yourself for no reason."

Rain continued to fall at a steady pace, but at least the thunder had stopped so there was little need to worry about lightning. Mark suddenly realized they would need something to bail water out of the boat.

"Damn," he said, shaking his head at his own carelessness, but there was no use worrying Carole Hannah now. They would have to take their chances.

"Don't worry; I brought two plastic tumblers," Carole Hannah said quickly. "They're in my pockets."

"Of course, you did," Mark said, shaking his head in amazement.

Within minutes, they saw Nell's house and paddled with all their strength toward river right to maneuver the canoe against the front steps. Carole Hannah held on to the porch railing while Mark tied the boat to a post. He grabbed onto the railing to hold the canoe steady for her as she stepped through the water onto the porch. Then he lunged out of the boat into the water, watching her closely and holding on for dear life to the porch railing.

Carole Hannah pounded on the front door several times before realizing it had been left unlocked. She pushed open the door and stepped into several inches of icy water. There was no way to close the door now as creek water poured into the house. She saw several pieces of furniture, including Gran's favorite rocking chair, floating toward the kitchen and felt sick to her stomach.

"Gran! Granny Nell!" she cried out in terror as Mark held onto her arm for balance.

"Easy," Mark said. "I'm right behind you. She's upstairs."

"Could we be electrocuted?" Carole Hannah asked.

"The house is dark, so the power has already been cut off by the storm," he said, placing his hand on the small of her back, as much for his own comfort as hers.

Now she could hear a faint sound coming from upstairs. When they reached the second floor, they found Nell safely tucked into her bed.

"I knew you'd get here in time," the old woman said. "I wasn't worried at all."

"Well, I was," Carole Hannah said, and leaned over to kiss the rose-scented cheek. "We're here now. You're safe."

Mark went back outside and pulled the canoe directly to the front door of the house. Carole Hannah helped her grandmother downstairs, through the water, and into the waiting canoe. Nell was in high spirits as she gamely placed one foot into the canoe and allowed Mark to lift her onto the middle seat. Carole Hannah fastened her grandmother into the life jacket Mark provided and wrapped her in a stadium blanket.

"Cee, why don't you get in now," Mark said. "I'm going to push the boat out farther onto the front porch, and then we can launch back into the water. Nell, have you ever come down your front steps in a canoe?"

Granny Nell smiled and shook her head. "I guess there's a first time for everything," she replied gaily.

Carole Hannah wrapped the blanket tighter around her shivering grandmother and pulled her cell phone from the watertight bag she had remembered to bring.

Since she wasn't sure whether her parents were at home or at the tavern, she dialed their cell phone number. Gil snatched up the phone after the first ring.

"Carole Hannah, where in the devil are you?" he yelled into the phone.

"We're at Gran's house, Dad. Everything's fine. Mark and I have Gran in his canoe, and we're about to get back into the creek. We're planning to take-out at the next stop down the creek from Gran's house, so just meet us on dry land as close as you can get to the water."

"Mom and I are on our way," Gil answered. "You guys be careful."

"Bring more blankets, Dad," she remembered to say before hanging up. She managed a grin as she placed the phone back into the zippered dry bag and took her seat in front.

"For your pleasure this morning," she announced brightly through chattering teeth, "we have the handsome Captain Baker sailing our boat. I am your tour director, Carole Hannah Banana," she said, suddenly recalling the nickname Reuben had called her when she was a little girl. "We hope you enjoy your cruise."

Even Mark had to laugh when Granny Nell commented dryly, "I didn't know *The Love Boat* sailed this far inland."

Gil and Connie waited anxiously downstream as Mark jumped out to push the boat onto the muddy shore. The mud was so thick that both men had to assist Nell out of the boat. Then Mark picked her up and carried her to the waiting car. Carole Hannah's boots felt like lead weights as she trudged out of the water and through the sucking mud onto solid ground.

"Mother, thank God you're okay," Gil said, holding her tightly and kissing her forehead. Guilt was visible on his face. "I'm so sorry," he said, helping her into the front seat of the car. "I should've known what was happening. I should've made you leave the house yesterday."

Nell laid her hand on his arm. "Son, this was not yours to know," she said firmly. "I had to be the one to choose to accept help. That's one of my lessons to learn in this lifetime."

Gil met his mother's steady gaze and gave thanks for the strength and clarity he saw in those brilliant blue eyes. "Well, it looks as though you're going to be our guest for a while."

Connie got into the back seat of the car and placed her hand on Nell's shoulder. "Mother, there's wedding soup waiting on the stove. You can have a hot bath and get settled in your room. I'm so glad you'll be spending time with us."

"Thank you, dear," Gran replied. For once, she said nothing more.

Carole Hannah was so exhausted from paddling the fast current, her muscles felt nearly useless as she allowed herself to be enfolded in Mark's arms. They were both soaking wet and shivering.

"Thank you," she said as tears held in check for so long flowed freely down her cheeks. "Thank you so much. What would I do without you?"

Mark drew her closer to him and kissed her chattering blue lips. "Let's not find out," he said.

## **Cannellini Bean Dip**

2 19-oz. cans cannellini beans, rinsed and drained  
1/2 cup chopped walnuts  
1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil  
1/4 cup water  
3 tbsp. Balsamic vinegar  
1/2 tsp. sea salt  
1/2 tsp. freshly ground pepper  
1 tbsp. plus 1 tsp. dried basil  
3 tbsp. minced onion  
1 tbsp. lemon zest

In food processor, puree all ingredients until smooth. Cover and refrigerate.

### **Pita Chips**

1 package whole wheat pita bread  
6 tbsp. olive oil  
2 tbsp. dried oregano  
3 tbsp. red pepper flakes

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Cut each pita in half through the middle so that you have two thin rounds. Cut each round into quarters and then again into eighths. In a small bowl, mix together olive oil, oregano, and red pepper flakes.

On a cookie sheet lined with aluminum foil, arrange pita bread pieces, and brush each one lightly with the olive oil mixture. Bake chips for 6 to 7 minutes or until lightly toasted.



## Chapter 23

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CAROLE HANNAH BIT INTO A WHOLE-WHEAT bagel loaded with garlic and chive-flavored cream cheese as she finished typing the final eight recipes into *Creekside Tavern Recipes: A Taste of Western Pennsylvania Home Cooking*.

The cookbook contained 230 recipes, including breakfast, appetizer, salad, soup, entrée, and dessert categories. Each recipe had been taste-tested and enthusiastically approved by her children, members of the Sherard family, and patrons of the Creekside Tavern. As she hit the final keystroke on her newest recipe for brown rice herbed pilaf, she formatted the document into full-screen book-reading form and stared in amazed delight as the document changed from individual typed pages into an actual book.

“Wow, I really did it,” she said in wonder. Leaping out of the chair, she gave herself a high five and yelled, “Woo hoo! I’m an author!”

Florabelle galloped downstairs to see what could possibly be the matter this time with her unpredictable human.

“Hey, girl, we have our first cookbook!” Carole Hannah said joyfully, shaking the dog’s paw.

Feeling the need to express gratitude, she went to her chair and sat down, willing herself to take slow, deep breaths. She felt such exuberant joy that she could barely contain herself or slow her thoughts. First, she expressed thanks for the completion of her cookbook. Then as she began to feel the calming sensation of the breath, she named each of the blessings that had come into her life during the past year. From her

comfortable cottage to an enjoyable job, meaningful time spent with family, renewal of friendships, a cookbook, and, oh yes, new love with a wonderful man, Carole Hannah realized that all of her dreams had manifested. Her life was exactly as she had envisioned and dreamed it could be.

The rest of that day, she floated blissfully around the tavern kitchen, humming to herself as she filled customer orders. Garnishing sandwich plates with spontaneously created vegetable flowers, she didn't notice the amused look on her mother's face.

Another idea had taken root for a cookbook of seasonal soups and salads. Pulling ingredients from the pantry shelf, she announced to Connie, "I have a new salad dressing to try out today using fresh rosemary, basil, and oregano from the kitchen garden."

Her mother looked up from the barbeque sauce she was stirring. "I'm not sure how it could beat the last dressing recipe you concocted, but I can't wait to try it."

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Jake walked into the bar later that day and greeted Holly with a hug and kiss. Regulars had a pool underway that there would be an engagement ring by Christmas.

For the past few weeks, Jake and Holly had immersed themselves in creating a website for Jake's tree-carving business. Holly was adept at uploading graphics and found out, to her surprise, that she also had a flair for writing. However, she felt the need for some expert help and coaching in website design. Reuben and Althea were willing to pay for a course at the community college, but Holly and Jake were impatient to get the site up and running. Unexpected help came in the form of Jack Whittaker, Tony's youngest son, who was home on summer break from Carnegie Mellon University. Within a week, Jake's website received hundreds of hits.

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Carla stubbornly set a September wedding date and purchased her dream wedding dress, a lace gown with a long train, encrusted with seed pearls and crystals, and rumored to cost over \$4,500. Tony, who still

had not officially said he wanted to get married, passively went along with Carla's plan.

"Well, I'll be darned," Gil whispered to Connie at church that Sunday as Reuben called the congregation to attention. He waited expectantly while Reuben made announcements of general interest.

"I'm saving the best news for last," Reuben said with a broad smile. "I'd like to announce that Tony Whittaker and Carla Morgan will be married in this church September eighteenth, proving once and for all that miracles do occur."

The congregation laughed and broke into applause while Carla beamed, her arm linked tightly through the crook of Tony's elbow.

Turning around to smile her congratulations at the bride-to-be, Carole Hannah noticed embarrassment and what appeared to be resignation in Tony's smile. She hoped that as the wedding date approached, he would arrive at some peace with the idea of marriage.

As she settled back in her seat, she exchanged surreptitious glances with Terry in the choir loft before Terry looked away quickly. Was it sadness she saw in her best friend's eyes? She sent a silent blessing her way.

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On a Saturday night in early June, Sandy's paintings were featured in a gallery exhibit in the stylish, eclectic Shadyside section of Pittsburgh. Carole Hannah and Mark drove into the city on Friday night with plans to spend their first weekend together enjoying a variety of good restaurants, visiting museums and other art galleries, and seeing the sights of the city.

Other members of the Sherard family drove together in Reuben's white church van. Tonight, the tavern's other employees were in charge of running the business. Gil held his breath as he shuffled Connie out of the kitchen and into the van before she changed her mind. On the drive to Pittsburgh, she was quiet, no doubt fretting all the possibilities that might happen in her absence. But then, to Gil's relief, she breathed a sigh of happiness as the scenic rivers, bridges, and tall buildings of downtown Pittsburgh came into view.

She placed her hand over his, smiling. "I needed this," she said as he lifted her small hand to his lips.

The gallery was painted a stark white with bleached-oak wood floors and comfortable modular sofa seating. Near the entrance, Sandy perched on a high black stool, surveying the crowd of people viewing her latest exhibit. She looked lovely in a simple violet sheath with amethyst drop earrings. Nearby, the gallery staff hand-passed trays of wine and elegant hors d'oeuvres. Occasionally, she answered questions about the sources for her inspiration, acknowledged compliments, and listened carefully to the comments of other artists. Already, there were red sale dots on four of the larger paintings and two of the smaller ones, ensuring the commercial success of the exhibit. However, Sandy wanted more. She wanted it to be a critical success.

Halfway through the evening, Connie turned to look for Sandy and saw her embracing an attractive, distinguished man with silver hair at his temples. No doubt, this was a good customer or long-time artist friend, she thought. She was surprised to see Sandy and the man walking hand-in-hand toward her.

"Mother, would you grab Dad for a minute?" Sandy asked. "I'd like to introduce you to someone very special."

Connie beckoned Gil to join her. Carole Hannah and Mark moved closer so they could hear as Sandy said, "Mother and Dad, I'd like to introduce you to Bill Stein. Bill, these are my parents, Gil and Connie Sherard."

Bill stepped forward to shake Gil's hand and pressed his cheek to Connie's as she warmly embraced him. Then Sandy introduced Bill to the other members of her family. Granny Nell's eyes sparkled as she sipped her chardonnay.

Gil and Carole Hannah exchanged a knowing look. There had been an entirely new facet to Sandy's personality in recent weeks. They could see the change clearly tonight in the way she remained close to Bill's side and in how the couple's eyes returned again and again to one other. They were clearly in love. Whether the catalyst for this dramatic shift in Sandy's attitude toward love was Randall's attack, no one could be sure. Nor would it ever be known whether many years of loving Bill had simply paved the way for awareness of her true feelings. As for Bill, his eyes never strayed far from the woman he had loved since the moment he first caught sight of her.

As family members visited together over glasses of wine, Sandy

cleared her throat. "I'd like to make an announcement," she said. "Since the entire family is here, it seems the perfect time to let you know that I've decided to move to Pittsburgh in late summer to take advantage of a recent offer to become a lecturer and visiting artist at Pitt. This is really a dream come true, and it will give me a chance to spend more time with Bill."

His eyes gleamed as he squeezed her hand. Sandy linked her other hand through the crook of his arm. "I'm planning to keep the house and studio in Walkers Corner, at least for the time being," she said, "so that Bill and I have a place to get away and bring his daughters."

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Later, following a romantic dinner in a restaurant overlooking the city, Carole Hannah lay contentedly in Mark's arms, listening to the occasional night sounds of the city. She thought about how her most heartfelt desires had been answered—not always on her own timeline, but definitely according to the pictures she had painted in her mind's eye.

In the stillness of her thoughts, while she listened to Mark's quiet breathing, she heard Granny Nell's voice telling her, "Dare to dream for what you want. Be specific, Carole Hannah. Then listen and wait for what comes."

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*To: WhitneyL; RileyL; BoT*

*From: CookOntheGo*

*Subject: Coming to Chicago*

*I just wanted to give you guys a heads-up that I'll be coming to Chicago in mid-August for a few days. Are you ready for this? A publisher has expressed interest in my cookbook, and I'm going to meet with her to talk about it. Even though I tried to envision this happening, it still seems so unreal.*

*I thought I'd stay over for a few days, and we can have a*



*special weekend together, if that works for all three of you. Riley, I'll book a flight for you from Kansas City.*

*Aunt Sandy's art show went really well--lots of sales. There was also a nice article in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. We were surprised, though, to hear the biggest news: she's moving to Pittsburgh to take a visiting artist position at Pitt. As if that wasn't enough of a shock, she also introduced us to Bill Stein. We thought he was a new man in her life, but apparently they've been an item for many years. They're clearly in love. Who knew?*

*Mark and I had a great time seeing a couple of museums and eating at some very good restaurants. He says to tell you hello and to let you know that Michael and his family are coming here later in September for a canoe trip. You ought to think about joining us, if you can.*

*Jake and Holly are working on a website for Jake's tree-carving business, and Tony's youngest son, Jack, is helping them. And speaking of Tony, he and Carla finally set a wedding date this September, to the amazement of everyone in Walkers Corner. It'll be good to see him settled.*

*Great-Granny Nell is back in her house, which has been cleaned up and refinished. In addition to damaging the first floor of her house, the floodwaters killed many of her plants, even the ones she's had for decades. I hate to think of the amount of work it will take to get everything back to the way it used to be. At her age-- by the way, she had her 94th birthday June 14th--it's a lot to undertake. Truthfully, though, you'd never guess she was that old from the way she's been putting in long days getting her life back to normal. She's so happy to be back in her home after staying with Grandma and Grandpa for almost two months. Grandpa wants her to move in with them permanently, but*

*I don't think that's even a remote possibility for, say, the next  
twenty years!*

*Can't wait to see you all!*

*Love, Mom*

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As mid-July arrived, the mini-campaign to raise matching funds for the water cleanup project went officially over goal by \$4,025. Carole Hannah tallied up gifts and pledges, and realized with glee that they could start the second phase of the project by early August. The passive filtering system would be enhanced farther downstream in two more locations.

After the floodwaters receded and cleanup was completed at Granny Nell's house, Carole Hannah was dismayed at the sour-smelling mud coating so much of Nell's greenhouse and yard. Many of Nell's plants had died after being underwater for so long. Carole Hannah was sure that everything her grandmother had nurtured for so long had been destroyed, and she couldn't stop the heartbroken tears as she watched Nell tenderly examine a straggly blueberry bush. She worried that the shock of seeing all this damage would devastate her grandmother, but Nell stepped back and briskly surveyed the scene.

"Some have died," she announced without emotion. "Others have survived according to their ability to recover from Mother Nature's capricious ways. Bless them."

"Plants have their own natural rhythm, just like the creek," Mark agreed. "They'll be back soon."

Then he and Carole Hannah donned gardening gloves to assist with the cleanup.

## **Thyme for Brown Rice and Herb Pilaf**

1 tbsp. extra virgin olive oil, 1 tbsp. butter  
1 small onion, finely diced, about 1 cup  
2 cups celery, diced  
1 1/2 cups vegetable or chicken broth  
3 cups hot, cooked brown rice  
1/4 cup finely diced sun-dried tomatoes, rehydrated in water and drained on paper towel  
2 tsp. dried thyme  
Sea salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

In a medium saucepan, melt butter into olive oil over medium heat. Add onion and celery, and cook, stirring occasionally, until onion is translucent. Stir in rice, tomatoes, broth, and thyme. Reduce heat to simmer, cover, and cook until liquid is evaporated, about 10 to 12 minutes. Let stand five minutes, fluff with a fork, and season with salt and pepper.

## **Herbed Balsamic Vinaigrette**

2/3 cup extra virgin olive oil  
1/3 cup Balsamic vinegar  
1 tbsp. dried oregano  
1 tbsp. dried rosemary  
1 tbsp. dried basil  
1 tbsp. garlic powder or 4 cloves garlic, minced  
1 tsp. sea salt  
1/4 tsp. freshly ground coarse black pepper

Mix ingredients together, cover, and allow flavors to blend for 24 hours.

## Chapter 24

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**I**MMEDIATELY FOLLOWING CHURCH SERVICE ONE SUNDAY in late July, the Sherard clan and a few close friends gathered on the tavern's patio facing the creek. It was time to bottle the red and white wines the tavern served throughout the year.

Bill drove over from Pittsburgh with Amy and Abby in tow. The little girls, who had never spent time in the country, were fascinated by the creek, and Bill had a difficult time preventing them from taking an unplanned swim.

"Amy! Abby! Get back here," he said. "That creek is deeper than you think."

"Please, Daddy, can we go in the water?" Amy asked while her younger sister jumped up and down with excitement.

Bill hesitated. "The only water they've ever seen is the swimming pool at the country club," he told Sandy.

"Tomorrow will be a better day to swim," Sandy said to the girls, taking charge. "I'll teach you to paddle a canoe, too."

The girls responded with ear-piercing shrieks of delight. With a sigh, Bill sent them inside with Evan to watch *Bambi* while the adults prepared to bottle the newest vintages.

Gil, Reuben, and Tony wheeled the huge six-gallon glass carboys that contained each of the red and white wines out to the patio, where Connie, Althea, Sandy, and Carole Hannah prepared the empty wine bottles.

"You need to rinse those bottles in sanitizing solution to prevent

secondary bacteria from affecting the finished product,” Gil reminded them. “Rinse them in clean water afterward, so there’s no aftertaste.”

Meanwhile, Terry soaked corks in sanitizing solution and then water to cleanse and soften them.

Working as a team, Gil and Tony, along with Reuben and Mark, lifted the enormous carboys onto a high, sturdy table.

“Don’t shake the containers too much or it’ll affect the clarity of the wines,” Gil said as he kept a sharp eye on his helpers. “Reuben, slow the heck down.”

Reuben looked sheepish. “Sorry, Dad.”

Each batch of wine went through its second and final fermentation process in the glass carboys before bottling. Jake and Holly sanitized six-gallon plastic containers and arranged them directly below the glass carboys. The plastic containers featured taps on the sides that made the bottling process much easier. As each step was completed, Gil checked it off in a notebook.

Humming to herself, Connie sanitized clear plastic tubing to snake between the carboys and the plastic containers. She handed the tube to Gil. “Ready?” she asked.

He inserted one end of the tube into the glass carboy; the other end went into the plastic container. He quickly sucked a mouthful of air into the tube to start the flow of gravity. “There she goes,” he said, watching intently as the wine began flowing from the glass carboy into the plastic container.

Tony held the end of the plastic tube in place in the carboy while Gil monitored the process at the other end.

“Be careful not to let the tip of that tube touch the residue on the bottom,” Gil cautioned him, watching as the clear golden wine flowed through the tube. “We don’t want any of that cloudy stuff on the bottom.”

“You aren’t going to waste any wine, are you?” Mark asked, looking concerned.

Carole Hannah bit her lip to keep from laughing. Gil was a perfectionist about the quality of tavern wines; yet it was a point of pride with him that rarely did any get spilled or thrown out.

“Don’t worry about the quantity. Think about quality,” he stressed with uncharacteristic irritation. “We’ll get plenty of bottles out of this



batch, but we might not have to do a secondary filtration if we keep the cloudy residue on the bottom from getting stirred up.”

When the wine had been emptied from the glass carboys into the plastic containers, the carboys were washed thoroughly with water and more sanitizing solution. Then the plastic containers, which were filled with the decanted wine, were moved up onto the table. This next step was the point at which fast, efficient teamwork was essential.

“Get those bottles lined up so you can move fast,” Gil instructed. “Bill and Reuben, you hand them to Terry and Tony.”

Carole Hannah kept an eye on the taps at the sides of the containers to make sure they didn’t leak wine while Sandy and Bill quickly began lining up bottles. Mark held a sterilized automotive funnel under the tap. Tony placed the first bottle under the funnel, opened the tap, and hooted in delight as golden wine flowed through the funnel and into the bottle. Under Gil’s expert supervision, the crew began an assembly line with Bill handing bottles to Terry and Tony, who quickly placed them under the funnel and then removed them, being careful not to spill any of the wine. As Terry placed each bottle beneath the funnel, Tony turned on the tap. They had a good rhythm, and very little wine was wasted.

Sandy moved the filled bottles to another area, where Jake and Holly used the corking machine that inserted corks into each bottle.

Within three hours, Gil and his crew transferred fourteen containers of wine, including chardonnay, pinot grigio, merlot, table red, cabernet sauvignon, and table white into the waiting bottles. With their hands sticky and their clothing stained with splashes of wine, the winemakers congratulated each other when the last bottle was corked. Labeling the bottles and putting foil over the corks would be done later.

“It takes a lot of beer to make good wine,” Gil joked, passing around bottles of ice cold beer to his tired, proud volunteers.

As the afternoon sun dropped lower in the sky, they sat at tables on the patio and toasted another successful afternoon of wine-making. While Bill and Sandy went inside to supervise the children, Connie and Althea helped Carole Hannah prepare a simple buffet supper of submarine sandwiches, chips, potato salad, tossed salad, and iced brownies.

As she arranged heaping platters of food on a side table, Carole

Hannah noticed Tony and Terry talking quietly in the corner of the patio. Tony looked troubled, and Terry had an earnest look on her face as she listened. Carole Hannah wondered for a fleeting moment whether Terry had ever been interested in Tony romantically or whether they'd ever gone out on a date. Even as the thought entered her mind, she knew there had been someone standing in their way, and it hadn't been Carla.

After dinner, Gil and Connie rose together, arms around each other's waists. Gil rapped on his iced tea glass with a fork to get everyone's attention.

"Connie and I have a very important announcement to make," he said. "In September, we're taking the honeymoon we never got to take years ago. We're going to Scotland and Ireland for two weeks."

Everyone clapped and whistled until Connie smiled and raised her hand for quiet. "That isn't the only announcement we'd like to make, though," she said. "This one is very important because it affects our family and our business."

She and Gil exchanged meaningful glances.

Gil cleared his throat. "As all of you know, we were delighted when Carole Hannah decided to come back home and work in the business. I'm sure everyone agrees that she's done a marvelous job. Having her here certainly has made our lives much easier.

Sandy affectionately rubbed her hand in circles over Carole Hannah's back as Gil continued speaking.

"Carole Hannah has agreed to become the new general manager of the Creekside Tavern and Inn. Someone has to run this place while my bride and I are off globetrotting."

The cheers got even louder, and Tony whistled shrilly through his fingers as Carole Hannah blushed with pleasure. Mark leaned over to kiss her cheek.

She smiled humbly. "I'll do everything in my power to make sure the Creekside Tavern and Inn is still the best place to eat and sleep for miles around," she said. "I'll need everyone's help, though."

The decision to name Carole Hannah as general manager had been in her parents' minds for months as they planned a seamless transition. When they made their gift commitment to the Doe Run campaign, Gil

cleared his throat and said, "Please make sure the rest of these payments from the business get made on time."

"Dad, I won't need to remind you. You never forget things like that," she said.

He held up his hand. "Actually, Carole Hannah, I'd like for you to hear us out for a moment."

Connie smiled reassuringly at her daughter.

"Your mother and I couldn't be more proud of you for your accomplishments this year. It's not just the great job you've done in the tavern; not just the cookbook—although that was quite a feat, too. More than that, you've courageously made decisions that many people would have been afraid to make. We recognize how difficult it's been for you to leave the secure life you knew in Kansas to move back here. We also see that you've taken on an important volunteer leadership role in the community and been very successful."

"I'm very happy here, Dad," Carole Hannah said in some confusion.

"We can see that you're happy here, and we're very proud of you," her mother said. She placed her hand over her daughter's. "It's time for us to transition into a new role: semi-retirement. Dad and I want to see the world. That's why we'd be so pleased and proud if you'd become the new general manager of the Creekside Tavern and Inn."

"Oh, my goodness," Carole Hannah said slowly, her eyes wide with disbelief. "I don't know what to say. Are you sure I'm ready for this?"

"There's no one else we can imagine more capable than you to take over," Gil said. "We can hardly trust the business to strangers. And in case you're worried, we thought long and hard about a role for Sandy. But she told us that she doesn't want any kind of management job—never has. And now that she's moving to Pittsburgh to be with Bill, she won't be here to help out anymore, either."

Carole Hannah threw her hands up in the air. "Then I accept," she said, beaming.

"We'd like for you to keep this to yourself until Sunday, after wine-making is finished, so we can tell everyone at the same time," Gil said, and Carole Hannah agreed.

As they sat around the patio, celebrating the big news, Carole Hannah basked in the congratulations and good wishes of family and

friends. With the announcement came the realization that everything in her life was just as she wanted it to be, with a few extra features she hadn't even considered. She glanced over at Tony, who smiled and winked.

"Way to go!" He mouthed the words silently, and she returned his smile.

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Later that evening, Terry came over, and they sat on the sofa drinking red wine and listening to Dan Fogelberg, their favorite singer/songwriter. As they listened to his melodic voice and memorable melodies, Terry was uncharacteristically quiet, Carole Hannah thought. For once, there was no gossip or jokes about men and sex.

"It looked like you and Tony had a pretty heavy discussion today," Carole Hannah said in an effort to draw her out.

"Actually, we were talking about their wedding," Terry said slowly. "Carla put a deposit down for Street to play at their reception."

"I'm not surprised. Who else would she ask but you guys? Dad said she talked with him about having the reception at the tavern, too." Carole Hannah grimaced. "But then he told her that she'd have to work with me from now on, and she said she might choose the VFW hall, instead."

"I know. Tony said Carla doesn't want to have her reception at the tavern because you're in charge now. He's pretty ticked about that. Cee, he doesn't want to marry Carla, but the longer he waits to tell her how he feels, the more likely it is that he'll end up married. And you know what? I don't think he has the guts to end it."

"There's still a slight possibility he will," Carole Hannah said. "But I agree that it's looking more likely there will be a wedding." She let out a deep breath. "It probably has a lot to do with living together and the complications of getting out of that situation. It would be as difficult as getting a divorce, at this point."

"Tony said that after Reuben's announcement at church, he realized there was no turning back. I think his mother also has something to do with this; she's never liked them living together, and she loves Carla. So do his sons."

"There's no turning back only if you believe in taking the path of



least resistance," Carole Hannah corrected her. "But I'm not judging him for whatever he decides. I know how hard it can be to break off a long-term relationship. When I was living in Kansas, I didn't necessarily want to marry Kevin, but I didn't want to end the relationship, either, so we drifted for three years. There were so many things about him I didn't think were right for me. I just felt more secure being with him, even if he wasn't the man I dreamed about. So we kept seeing each other, and Kevin began to assume that we'd live together or get married. I let that happen."

"It's easy to settle," Terry said. "No one wants to hurt someone else, and breaking up really *is* hard to do."

"I wish Tony could be happy because it would be easier on me if he were," Carole Hannah admitted with a sigh of recognition. "As Mark and I get more serious, I look at Tony, and I know he's watching us. His issues aren't any of my business, but it's hard to care about someone and know they're unhappy." She took a sip of wine. "Tony has always been a good man."

"He's a good man who's also incredibly needy," Terry said. "But you're right. It's all up to him. No one wants to see Carla hurt, though."

"That's true." Carole Hannah leaned forward to pour more wine into Terry's glass. She chose her next words carefully. "Terry, I have to ask you something, and please be honest. I've always wondered why you and Tony never ended up together. You've both been single and available at the same time."

"How could I?" Terry said. She shrugged and looked away. "I thought he was the love of your life."

Carole Hannah shook her head, studying Terry's face in amazement. "I didn't know you were thinking that or I would've told you it was fine with me if you and Tony dated. I wish you'd said something to me sooner."

"It doesn't matter, Cee. Even as recently as last year, I thought about the possibility of being with Tony if he ever broke up with Carla. But then I realized how he still felt about you. It was so obvious. Even after you and Mark started seeing each other, Tony was still holding a torch for you. I want someone who wants me, not someone who's settling for me."

"I agree. You deserve to be madly in love with someone who feels



the same way about you," Carole Hannah said fiercely. "It'll happen; I promise."

"I doubt that. When Royce and I got married, I was the one who pushed the marriage agenda," Terry said. "He was happy just hanging out together. But after so many years together, I said I needed more, and he gave in. Of course, I didn't know he was gay; I'm not sure he did, either, at the time. The thing with Frank, the keyboard player, happened after we were married for a while. I didn't suspect there was anything going on between them, but now that I look back, I realize that Royce avoided having sex with me. He'd act like he was too drunk or high. He'd come in late and sleep later than I did in the morning, too. It was like being married in separate shifts. We could go months without sex, but I just thought his libido was low from drinking and smoking pot."

"You're not the first woman in the world to marry a gay man, you know," Carole Hannah said gently. "It happens all the time. It's easier for someone to hide who they really are if they fear being judged for it. It's also true that people learn about themselves as they get older. Maybe Royce just didn't know when he married you that he preferred men."

"Or maybe I shouldn't have been so dense," Terry said. "Sometimes I look back and wonder how I could have been so stupid."

"Regrets aren't that useful; trust me. I used to regret my divorce from Tim, and then I regretted what happened with Kevin last year. But now I know the past is merely the path we leave behind us. It's only when we know what we *don't* want in life that we're able to figure out what we really do want. Bad stuff happens so we can learn our preferences and appreciate the good stuff that comes later."

Carole Hannah looked thoughtfully at the photo of Mark, now in a prominent place on her end table. "I'm a very different woman than I was before, even late last year. I used to squash myself down to make myself fit who I thought a man wanted me to be. I did that with Tony and then with my husband and then with Kevin. But now, things are different. I'm happy with who I am. I'm happy being with Mark because he's happy being with me. It didn't just happen. We chose to be with each other."

"You're lucky," Terry said, draining her glass. "I want that so much."

But there aren't a lot of available men around here, so it's not looking very likely that I'll ever find someone special."

"I think you'll find someone," Carole Hannah said with a knowing grin.

She closed her eyes until she saw indigo swirls of color. "There is someone. You just haven't met him yet, but he's nearby. I'm seeing a 'J' association—Jay or maybe James. Yes, I'm pretty sure his name is James, or maybe that's his middle name. I don't know if he's single, though, at least at this time. There's a strong female presence around him, although I get the impression it's more of a lingering thing." She breathed in deeply, focusing on the symbols that appeared in her mind's eye. "He's a widower, just like Mark. He has a son with a name that has a hard 'k' sound—Craig, Kyle, or maybe it's Keith. His son works with computers; he's some kind of computer expert."

"Are you kidding me?" Terry's eyes opened wide. "Carole Hannah! Are you really psychic like your grandmother?"

Carole Hannah opened her eyes and smiled. "I'm getting better at it all the time. Remember when we were kids and we used to play that game? You asked me questions and I answered them."

"I called you Eight Ball," Terry said. She snorted. "I thought you were just playing around, trying to pretend you were like Nell. Man! Can you give me winning lottery numbers? If I can't find love, can I at least be rich?"

Carole Hannah laughed. "It doesn't work that way."

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The following Saturday afternoon, as bicyclists sped by them on the trail, Carole Hannah and Mark walked hand-in-hand down the trail to Granny Nell's bungalow.

Whittaker Construction had done a beautiful job of cleaning up the water damage to the foundation and first floor, restoring the house to its previous condition. Walls had been repainted, and all of the hardwood floors were replaced. Antique furniture that had been destroyed by the floodwaters, including the upright piano, had been removed. But without skipping a beat, Nell replaced her ruined furniture with new pieces in a mission style she loved.

As they approached the house, they saw her busily tending new

flowers and herbs. She had recently celebrated her ninety-fourth birthday, but as they watched her dart like a hummingbird from plant to plant, she seemed timeless. They watched her for a few minutes before continuing along the trail.

As the afternoon sun began its descent in the sky, they stood together on the shore of Doe Run, arms around each other's waists. Several paddlers in kayaks of red, blue, and yellow splashed downstream toward the rapids while a few fishermen cast their lines along the water's edge.

The creek, now back to its normal level, continued its constant, forward motion toward a destination somewhere just beyond. Its eventual ending was not yet possible to know.

Taking Carole Hannah's hand, Mark led her carefully down the side of the hill to where the water lapped in small waves against the shore.

"Let it flow," he said. Then he kissed her.

## Afterward

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*A Guide to Meditation and Manifestation*, an essay by Carole Hannah Sherard, 2002.

The Universe is an abundant place made up of loving, creative energy that is available to us at all times. Throughout our busy lives, however, we often lose sight of this connection and feel adrift. In reality, whatever we erroneously believe is lacking in our lives is actually as near as our thoughts. Meditation is our way of aligning with our Source, of making contact with the Divine.

Meditation and prayer are not exactly the same activity, although they can be combined easily, if we choose. Prayer is communing with God, either silently or aloud, expressing our gratitude, concerns, or prayers of petition. Meditation is an act of focusing on the space between our conscious mind and our unconscious mind, allowing us to listen for that inner voice of soul and to envision acts of creation and allow them to occur through us. It is the way we can help bring our innermost desires to fruition. For many faith traditions, this act of quiet solitude and listening to Spirit is termed *contemplative prayer*.

The process of meditation allows us to move into an altered state of mind somewhere between being fully awake and asleep. If you have ever had the recognition of becoming involved in an activity and losing all track of time or place, you are already familiar with how it feels to enter that space. As we are drifting off to sleep, we experience that same quiet state of mind.

When meditating, it is best to have a dedicated space where you can be comfortable and free from any distractions. Close the blinds or

curtains, turn off the phone, and close the door. Have a small glass of water nearby. Although the body has annoying ways of making its needs known during meditation, we can anticipate and adapt.

Wear loose, soft clothing that moves with you. A lightweight, two-piece jersey outfit is ideal. When you put on these special clothes, your mind is already preparing for its journey. This is an ideal time to enjoy your favorite aroma, such as lavender, rose, or jasmine. Many people like to burn incense while they meditate. However, keep in mind that burning incense creates smoke that can drift into your nose or mouth and bring about respiratory distress.

If you are familiar with the use of gemstones and minerals in meditation work, you may want to hold a chunk of crystal, amethyst, or turquoise in your hand. Don't be surprised to feel energy between your skin and the gemstone as you enter the meditative state.

Some forms of meditation advise students to sit on a cushion on the floor, legs crossed in a lotus position. This position can be uncomfortable for many people because of the strain on knees or hips. In that case, it is fine to sit in a chair. Maintain a straight spine, feet flat on the floor with your head facing forward. Avoid lying down, since this is the position that is most likely to induce sleep. Sometimes meditation does lead to sleep, which is a sign that a nap may be what your body needs most.

A small fountain of trickling water or the background sounds of nature also can produce relaxation in the same way that viewing an aquarium of gently swimming fish helps the mind to calm. Soft, rhythmic music is helpful, and there are guided meditation compact discs or tapes available that help the mind glide into the theta state, where it is most able to accept suggestions and to focus.

Nourishing breath is very important in meditation work. Deep breaths, taken through the nose and released slowly out through the mouth, help our bodies and minds to relax even further. Hold the breath in for four counts; release for six counts. Hold for four more counts; release for six counts. Continue breathing for several minutes until the breath becomes effortless. Some people find that doing breath work while gazing into a candle helps tune out distractions and allows them to focus on the breath. However, if you allow your eyes to close while breathing, you may begin to see colors that will swirl and become more intense, a sign that you are well on your way to the ideal state of mind for meditation.



Don't be concerned if your mind continues its annoying chatter, reminding you that the garage door might be open or a report is due by tomorrow. This is a normal function of the alpha and beta conscious brain states. With practice, these mental interruptions will subside. If you like, you can pretend to hit the delete icon on an imaginary e-mail toolbar when a thought presents itself, or visualize an ocean wave carrying the thought out to sea.

Meditation helps us produce visual stories, like mental movies, that help us zero in on the precise object of our desire. Focus on a positive scene with loving emotion—something that brings you happiness or pleasure. For example, if you are visualizing a new job, add the special touches that make it real. What kind of work do you enjoy doing? What kind of people do you meet in your new place of employment? Are co-workers congenial team players and fun to be around? How do you feel sitting at your desk in the morning? Are you happy when you see the amount on your paycheck? Create the scene just as you want it to be.

Visualization with sound is an ancient tool for manifestation—one that many experienced students of meditation swear by. “Om” or “Ah” are very common sounds to use during meditation. When you have the ideal picture in your mind of your heart's desire, open your mouth, take a deep breath, and exhale, chanting the special sound of your choice until the breath flows out completely. Take another breath and say or sing the sound. Let the breath flow out completely before taking a deep breath and expressing another “Om” or “Ah.” No matter what tone you use, this outpouring of emotion with sound enhances meditation by preventing outside thoughts from intruding on our vision.

Now release the image with faith, and patiently detach from the outcome. Simply allow the Divine to begin its work of bringing forth the people, situations, objects, or opportunities that can aid you in bringing about what it is that you most desire.

Trust in the wisdom of God to bring what is in your highest good, understanding that our connection with others and all living things on Earth means that what is good for us must also be in the highest good of all concerned.

Finally, remember that expressions of gratitude for all of our blessings help us maintain a sense of wonder and possibility while thanking God for all good things in our lives.

## *About the Author*

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Robin Strachan is a freelance writer whose poems, articles, and feature stories have appeared for over thirty years in regional and national publications. She also is a landscape artist and avid winemaker. She makes her home in a charming cottage set in a wooded area in the mountains of southwest Pennsylvania, where she wrote *Manifesting Dreams*, her first novel.













After the man in her life betrays her trust, Carole Hannah Sherard decides that a life makeover is in order. Yearning for a more balanced life, she quits her job as a university vice president to move back to Walker's Corner, Pennsylvania, where she intends to cook in her family's business, the Creekside Tavern and Inn, and write a cookbook.

If there's one thing Carole Hannah knows for certain, it's that her family isn't the most normal bunch. Every member of the Sherard clan has inherited what is known as the *Scottish Sight*. Her grandmother is a psychic healer. Her father is a kindly bartender always able to sense what customers need to hear. Her brother is a minister who cares deeply for his parishioners, but believes the *Sight* is a black mark on his soul.

Carole Hannah has inherited her family's psychic gifts, but learns that the *Sight* doesn't provide easy answers to every choice or challenge that faces her. Her high school sweetheart wants her back, but he's engaged to another woman. A troubled minister threatens her sister and best friend. And then there is Mark Baker, a handsome widowed professor who needs her help in more ways than one. Will Carole Hannah be able to use her abilities to help the people of Walker's Corner? Can she make all her dreams come true?

**ROBIN STRACHAN** is a writer whose poems, articles, and feature stories have appeared for over thirty years in regional and national publications. She also is a fundraiser, artist, and winemaker. She lives in a cottage located in a wooded area in the mountains of southwest Pennsylvania. She wrote *Manifesting Dreams*.



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