

Midnight at the Blackbird Café

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MIDNIGHT
AT
THE
BLACKBIRD
CAFÉ



Heather Webber



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
New York

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations,
and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's
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MIDNIGHT AT THE BLACKBIRD CAFÉ

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**For everyone who wishes they could
eat a piece of blackbird pie.**

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Midnight at the Blackbird Café

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“Why don’t you start at the beginning?”

“The beginning? Well, I reckon that was the funeral. The funeral turned into a damned circus when the blackbirds showed up.” Blackberry sweet tea sloshed over the rims of two mason jars as Faylene Wiggins abruptly slapped her hand on the tabletop. “Wait! Wait! You can’t print that. My mama would wash out my mouth with her home-made lemon verbena soap if she knew I cursed for the good Lord and all the world to see in your article.”

The reporter flipped the pages of his yellow steno pad. “I thought you said your mother was dead?”

“You’re not from these parts, so you’re excused for not understanding. Wicklow, Alabama, isn’t any old ordinary town, young man. Goodness, I wouldn’t put it past my mama to rise straight out of the ground and hunt me down, bar of soap clutched in her bony hand.” With a firm nod, she jabbed a finger in the air and added, “Now that you can print.”

Anna Kate

Commotion loud enough to wake the dead was never a great way to start the day.

Startled out of a deep sleep, I sat up. It was a quarter past five in the morning, and for a moment I didn’t know where I was. It was a

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familiar feeling, almost as comforting as the worn quilt I'd carted from town to town my whole nomadic life long.

As I rubbed tired eyes, clearing out sleep, the events of this past week slowly came back to me. Wicklow. The Blackbird Café. The funeral. The birds. The neighbors.

My God. The neighbors.

Drawing in a deep breath, I eased back onto the pillows. I didn't know what it was that had woken me, because all I heard now was the air-conditioning rattling through the vents, the tick of the hallway clock, and melodious birdsong. Nothing out of the ordinary.

If there was any mercy in this world, the noise hadn't been a tearful Mr. Lazenby banging on the café's front door—for the third morning in a row. He was a sweet, mournful old man who simply wanted his daily piece of pie, but all I wanted was to pull the pillow over my head until my alarm went off half an hour from now.

Instead, I came fully awake at the sound of unintelligible shouts, a mumbled roar that seemed like it originated directly beneath my second-floor window. Confused, I tossed the quilt aside and slid to the floor. I knee-walked across dusty pine boards to the window. Dawn brightened over the mountains on the eastern horizon, promising a sunny and undoubtedly humid spring day.

Looking downward, I saw a small group of men and women gathered in the side yard. About twenty strong, they wore big hats and sensible shoes, carried binoculars, and were lined up along the iron fence, staring into the backyard. I didn't recognize a single one of them.

Not that I had met *everyone* in town since I arrived from Boston, but it sure felt like I had.

It had been an intense week, starting with the fateful call that my grandmother Zora "Zee" Callow had passed away unexpectedly of natural causes. I'd made a whirlwind trip down here to Wicklow, a rundown small town nestled deep in the mountain shadows of northeast Alabama, to make funeral plans and meet with Granny Zee's lawyer. I then went back to Boston to pack my few belongings

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and forfeit the room I'd been renting in a quaint old colonial only one T stop away from UMass Boston, where I'd recently graduated.

I'd loaded my car, mentally prepped myself for a seventeen-hour drive, and headed south. I temporarily moved into the small apartment above the Blackbird Café. Buried my beloved Zee. And unsuccessfully evaded most of my kind yet nosy new neighbors who wanted to know anything and everything about Zee's secret, mysterious granddaughter, Anna Kate Callow.

Me.

There had been an endless stream of visitors these past few days, and I'd never seen so many zucchini loaves in all my life. Each neighbor had arrived with an aluminum foil-wrapped loaf, an anecdote about living in Wicklow, a long story about Zee and her café, and relentless queries about my age, my upbringing, my schooling, my mother's passing four years ago, and my father's identity. I hadn't minded the stories of Granny Zee at all, but I dodged most of the personal questions, especially the ones about my father. I wasn't ready to go there quite yet.

It had been an exhausting, emotional week, and I didn't want to even look at zucchini for a good long while.

Now this daybreak meeting. Who were these people?

A wave of muggy, warm air slapped me in the face like a wet towel as I pushed the window sash upward. It creaked in protest against the swollen wooden frame. "Hello? Hello!"

At the sound of my own voice, my head throbbed, pulsing sharply against my temples. I'd spent most of yesterday with Bow and Jena Barthelemy, the café's only employees, readying the café for its re-opening this morning. The energetic duo had given me a crash course in running the place, everything from ordering to inventory, tickets, and the point-of-sale system. I'd prepped dishes and familiarized myself with the menu and kitchen layout. The day had been nothing short of overwhelming, but Bow and Jena swore up and down that I'd catch on quickly enough.

Now, on my knees at the crack of dawn, craving strong coffee and

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utter silence, I questioned for the umpteenth time this week why on earth I'd moved, even short-term, to this tiny, two-stoplight Alabama town. I didn't belong here. I should be back in Boston, finalizing my plans for my move an hour west to Worcester, where I was going to start classes at UMass medical school in mid-August.

Then I remembered.

Zee.

More specifically, Zee's will.

"There, there!" someone shouted from below as he gestured into the backyard. Then he added in a somewhat shamed tone, "Never mind. It was a crow."

A chorus of grumbles echoed.

"Hello!" I shouted again.

No one seemed to hear me.

Grabbing my robe, I quickly covered up my knit shorts and tank top and ran a hand over my unruly hair. The stairs creaked as I hurried down them. The pine treads were polished in a dark satin finish that came from decades of use. I could easily imagine Granny Zee zipping up and down these steps, which was strange considering I'd never seen Zee do so. In fact, I had never even set foot in the Blackbird Café—or Wicklow, for that matter—until earlier this week.

Wicklow had always been forbidden territory, a family commandment created by my mom, Eden, the moment she left this town at eighteen years old, vowing that we would never return. That had been twenty-five years ago, when she had been just six weeks' pregnant with me. While growing up, every time I had asked about Wicklow, Granny's café, the blackbirds, my paternal grandparents, whom she hated with her whole heart, and of course, my father's tragic death, Mom stubbornly clammed up.

Not that I could wholly blame her silence—after all, she had lost a lot here in Wicklow, including the love of her life and almost her freedom when she'd been accused of murder. Yet it had always seemed to me that the thing she'd lost most was herself.

The double refrigerator hummed as I glanced at the soffit above

it, to the stenciled words that flowed from one side of the café to another.

Under midnight skies, Blackbirds sing, Loving notes, Baked in pies, Under midnight skies.

Zee had taught the verse to me as soon as I was old enough to speak full sentences, much to my mother's dismay.

Once, when I was seven years old, the two of them had a huge argument when Mom came home from work to find Zee teaching me how to make her café's famous blackbird pie. Mom had sent me straight to my room, but I could easily overhear the fight over me, Wicklow, and yes, blackbird pie, of all things, which wasn't made of actual blackbirds at all, but fruit. Heated, bitter words from my mother. Pleading ones from my grandmother.

"I don't want you talking about the blackbirds to Anna Kate anymore," Mom had said. "*Promise me.*"

Mom meant business if she asked for a promise. Callows prided themselves on not breaking promises. Not ever.

Granny had sighed loudly. "You can't keep the truth from her forever. She needs to know. She deserves to know. It's her *heritage.*"

"She's not ever going to step foot in Wicklow, so she doesn't need to know a thing."

"You and I both know that's not true. One day she'll end up in Wicklow, same as you. Your roots will pull you back where you belong."

"Not if I can help it."

"But darlin' girl, you can't stop it, no matter how far you run."

"Promise me," Mom repeated, the words tight, sharp.

It took Zee forever to answer before she said, "I promise not to say another word about the blackbirds."

My mother had come by her stubbornness honestly—she'd learned it straight at the knee of Zee, who wasn't one to back down when she believed in the strength of her convictions.

Later that night as Zee tucked me into bed, she offered to tell me a bedtime story.

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“This story stays between the two of us, Anna Kate, y’hear? Promise me you won’t tell a soul.”

I’d promised. It had been the first of many secrets we shared, all of which had been kept to this day.

Taking my hand in hers, she started the story. “Once upon a time, there was a family of Celtic women with healing hands and giving hearts, who knew the value of the earth and used its abundance to heal, to soothe, to comfort. Doing so filled their souls with peace and happiness. Those women held a secret.”

“What kind of secret?”

“A big one.” Her voice dropped low, her southern accent wrapping around me like a warm blanket. “The women are guardians of a place where, under midnight skies, spirits cross from this world through a mystical passageway to the Land of the Dead.”

“The Land of the Dead? Is that like heaven?”

“It’s exactly like heaven, darlin’.”

As Zee had spun the tale, I suspected the story wasn’t the least bit make-believe, despite how fantastical it seemed. Guardians and leafy passageways and messages from beyond delivered through pies. It should have been absurd, utterly laughable. Instead, it had sounded like history.

Heritage, even.

To Zee’s credit, she never did mention “blackbirds” again to me, but that was only semantics. In her story, she’d called the birds “tree keepers,” describing them as black as night. She’d told me all I needed to know about the blackbirds and their mission—an education that was supplemented over the years by our nature walks and her cooking and life lessons.

It was as though Zee had been prepping me for this day, when I’d be blindsided into taking over her kitchen for two months. She had known I’d come to Wicklow, just like she had told my mother all those years ago.

Shifting my thoughts away from Mom, Zee, and the blackbirds, I

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let out a breath, unlocked the back door, and then pushed open the screen door that led onto a long, weather-beaten deck. The door snapped shut behind me, a sharp thwack of wood against wood.

A late May sunrise colored the sky in a burst of bright orange and striated pinks while birds chirped and the fresh scent of morning filled the air, tinged with undertones of mint and basil.

I glanced around at the intertwining gravel pathways, raised stone beds, and mix of herbs, vegetables, and flowers, and could practically see my grandmother's heart in this yard, imprinted on each and every leaf rustling the mountain breeze.

As I headed for the assembly line of strangers lined up along the fence in the side yard, I couldn't help giving the evil eye to the duo of puny, drooping zucchini plants in a bed by the deck stairs. Several offered smiles as I approached, but it was an older man standing front and center at the gate who spoke up as I approached.

A floppy beige bucket hat shaded his eyes as he said, "Good morning, ma'am."

Ma'am. I'd been called ma'am at least two dozen times in the past week, and despite learning the term was a southern courtesy used on *any* woman, it still set my teeth on edge. Unless you were geriatric, no one used "ma'am" up north.

The man looked to be in his sixties, and was dressed in cargo khakis and a long-sleeved tee that had the words "Bird Nerd" on it. On his feet were hiking boots that seemed better suited for the trails of nearby Lookout Mountain than the grassy yard of a rural small-town café.

"Good morning," I said, noticing that the fresh air had taken my headache down a notch. "I'm sorry, but the café doesn't open until eight."

Wobbly beads of sweat sat on the tip of the man's bulbous nose. "Oh, we're not here to eat."

I tucked my hands into the pockets of my robe. "No? Then why are you here? In this yard? At the crack of dawn?"

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Eagerness filled his voice as he said, “We’re with the Gulf Coast Avian Society from down in Mobile, and we’re here for the *Turdus merula*. Have you seen one?”

“The turd *what?*”

“The common blackbird?” He enunciated clearly as if deciding I was a slow learner, and then held up a cell phone with an image of a blackbird on it. “A flock of *Turdus merula* has reportedly been seen near here, at the cemetery a few days ago? One of the locals said that the blackbirds nest in those there mulberry trees.”

I glanced over my shoulder at the twin red mulberry trees that stood protectively at the rear of the yard.

One particular family of guardians came from overseas a century ago, drawn to a small southern town. There, a passageway is marked with large, twin trees. Where their branches meet and entwine, a natural tunnel is formed—and at midnight, that tunnel spans this world and the heavenly one.

As the group gathered closer, clearly waiting for me to answer, I realized I should have anticipated something like this happening. When the blackbirds swooped through town on the way to Zee’s funeral, several tourists had freaked out at the sight, needing repeated reassurances from the locals that a Hitchcockian onslaught wasn’t imminent.

I hadn’t blamed the tourists for reacting the way they did. In normal people’s lives, a flock of birds didn’t appear at funerals to pay their respects. Let alone blackbirds that didn’t even belong on this continent.

The locals hadn’t really thought much about the appearance, other than the odd hour at which the birds were seen. The blackbirds had been part of Wicklow since its founding—and were as familiar to the townsfolk as the courthouse, the scenic vistas, and Mr. Lazenby’s bowties.

It had taken outsiders to question the oddity of their existence.

“Ma’am?” he prompted. “Have you seen any blackbirds?”

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“I’ve seen them,” I finally answered. “Well, females. They’re slightly lighter in color than the male pictured on your phone.”

The group let out a whoop. A few pulled out cell phones and started making calls.

“Where there are females, there are males.” He smiled as he wagged a finger at me.

Fighting the urge to wag a finger back at him, I kept quiet. There were no males, a fact that Sir Bird Nerd would discover for himself if he stuck around long enough.

“How many of them do you think there are?” he asked. “Estimation?”

Twenty-four in total, black as night, Zee had said. “Two dozen.”

More whoops went up.

I noticed a man step out of the big house next door—Hill House, appropriately named, as it sat atop a small hill. He leaned against a porch column and offered a hesitant wave.

Gideon Kipling, Zee’s lawyer. He’d been nothing but kind to me since I arrived, and seeing as how he hadn’t foisted a zucchini loaf on me at any point during the past week, I liked him. I waved back before focusing on the group of birders.

“Do the blackbirds nest in that tree?” the birding ringleader asked.

I hedged. “Not so much nest, no. But they perch there from time to time.”

Like from midnight to one in the morning—just long enough to sing their songs. The blackbirds only made daytime appearances on the rarest of occasions. Like funerals.

His bushy white eyebrows furrowed. “Are you sure they’re blackbirds? Not redwings or cowbirds or ravens or crows? The *Turdus merula* are extremely rare. They’ve only been spotted a handful of times in this country, most recently on Cape Cod a few years ago.”

I could have given him the exact location on the cape if he’d asked—it was where we’d been living when my mother died. Instead, I said, “I’m pretty sure. You are at the Blackbird Café, after all.”

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Skepticism skipped across his face, narrowing his eyes and pushing his lips out in a dissatisfied pucker. “Do you mind if we stay here and keep watch for a while?”

I couldn’t see the harm in letting these birdwatchers stay. No matter how long they watched, they’d never see the blackbirds for what they truly were.

“Ma’am? Is it okay if we stay?”

I grit my teeth. “On two conditions.”

“Name them,” he said.

“Stop calling me ma’am and stay on that side of the fence. The café will be open from eight until two if you get hungry.”

“Thank you kindly, ma’—” He coughed. “Thank you kindly.”

“You’re welcome.”

I headed back to the deck, but stopped first to apologize to the undeserving zucchini for my mean look earlier. It was then that I noticed a dark gray cat with light eyes watching me intently from its seat on a white stone bench in the center of the garden.

If Zee had a cat, I thought it a tidbit someone would have mentioned during one of the many, many visits I’d endured in the past couple of days. But it was also possible the neighbors were so caught up in trying to discover who my father was that they didn’t think to mention a pet. I didn’t see a collar as I smacked my lips, making kissing noises. “Here, kitty kitty.”

The cat stiffened, then bolted, disappearing into a flower bed. I smiled. It was rather refreshing to know there was at least one creature in this town who didn’t want to meet me.

As I climbed the creaking deck steps, I fought the sudden urge to also hide in the garden, and instead went into the café to face the day head-on.

2



Natalie

If my mother knew where I was going, she'd undoubtedly clutch her signature double strand of pearls, purse her lips, and vociferously question the heavens above as to where she had gone wrong raising her only daughter.

Seelie Earl Linden had often interrogated the heavens during my twenty-eight years of being on this earth.

The heavens, to my knowledge, never replied. That only served to vex Mama even more than *I* did. Quite the feat.

My grip tightened on the handles of the stroller as I walked down Mountain Laurel Lane, Wicklow's one and only main street. The wide road was lined on both sides with painted brick shops, offices, houses, and a few restaurants. An oval-shaped median with a high curb ran the length of the street, starting at the church with its jutting white spire at the north end of the block to the stone courthouse at the south.

Nearly a century ago, Wicklow had been established as a charming artists' colony that boasted of its eclectic population. Old, young. Rich, poor. Offbeat, average. Country, gentility. All had come together for a shared love of the arts and the magical mountain air. Between the natural landscape with its breathtaking vistas, the unique shops and artisans, and the undercurrent that this town was different, *special*, Wicklow quickly became a day trip hotspot for tourists.

Now, I reflected, Wicklow wasn't so much as lukewarm.

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As I walked along, I couldn't help noticing that in the four years I had been gone from my hometown, a dozen more shops and restaurants had been boarded up and those that remained open looked mighty tired from carrying Wicklow's fiscal burden.

I knew bone-weary exhaustion when I saw it.

The housing recession a decade ago had caused the town to fall on hard times with a resounding thud. A lot of the artists and craftsmen had moved along to more lucrative, populated locations like Fairhope and Mobile, abandoning their houses and shops. By the time the economy rebounded, the damage had already been done. Wicklow had struggled ever since. Recently, however, a committee had been formed to try and rejuvenate what was left.

Revitalization seemed an impossible task, though I saw the committee's fingerprints on the overflowing flower baskets hanging from lampposts, the new wrought-iron wastebaskets dotting the sidewalk, the patched sidewalk cracks, and the colorful posters touting the annual July 4th celebration. It was going to take a lot more than some pink petunias and trash cans to bring this community back to life, but I had to admire that the committee was *trying*. Determination was rooted deep in this mountain town.

Glancing down, I checked on my daughter. Ollie was happy as could be in the stroller, playing with the buckle strap, babbling away. She was an easygoing baby, and I often envied her contentment. She was too young to understand the chaos and heartbreak of my world, and for that I gave thanks.

Pivoting, I crossed again in front of the Blackbird Café. The café was one of the lucky ones that had survived the economy's downturn. It was a favorite among locals, not only because of its legendary pies, but because, many have said, Zee put her heart and soul into the restaurant—and shared that with those who ate there. How it would survive without her, I didn't know, but it, too, was trying.

I'd walked past the entrance three times already, trying to work up the nerve to go inside. All I wanted was a piece of blackbird pie before it sold out for the day. Yet . . . I hadn't been able to bring my-

self to open the door quite yet. Every time I tried, the image of my mother's face swam in front of my eyes and I chickened out, walking straight on past.

It had been a long time since I had set out to antagonize my mother on purpose, and I was trying my best to put those days behind me. To start fresh. To make peace, for Ollie's sake.

And maybe a little for my sake too.

Mama had frozen me out of her life for a good, long time now, but during the past week or so, she had started to show signs of thawing. A kind glance. A slight smile. I didn't want to ruin that progress . . . But I really, really wanted that pie. If what people said about the pie was true, I *needed* it—and the answers it might provide—so I could get on with my life.

"Natalie Linden Walker! Is that you? If this don't beat all. It's good to see you, girl! It's been too long."

Oh no. Not Faylene Wiggins. *Anyone* but Faylene. If there had been a prayer of my mother not learning of this pie escapade for a good long while, it just went out the window. "Good morning, Faylene."

Faylene, a retired high school art teacher, was a talker. For as long as I had known her, she rambled on fast-forward, speeding through a conversation, barely stopping to breathe, let alone wait for a response. Tall and plump with a sassy pitch-black bob, she had to be in her early sixties, but had more energy than I did at more than half her age.

"I didn't know you were back in town, Natalie!" She gave me a quick side hug. "Are y'all headed for the reopening of the café? Have you already met Anna Kate? Does your mama know you're here? Here at the Blackbird, not here in town. I assume she knows *that*." Faylene tittered. "Where are you staying? Back at home? Are you just visiting or planning to stay for a while?"

I ignored most of the questions, praying Faylene would forget she asked them, as she often did, and said, "We're set up in my parents' guest house for the foreseeable future." Lord help them all.

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The little house, as it had been nicknamed, was a two-bedroom, one-bath, seven-hundred-square-foot cottage that might be entirely too close to my mother for my comfort, being that it was in her backyard. It had free rent, however, and was the perfect place to try to pick up the pieces of my life.

“Doc and Seelie must love having you home! Oh! And this one, too! Is this here Olivia Leigh?” Faylene’s arthritic knees popped as she bent down in front of the stroller. “Why, aren’t you a beauty! Look just like your mama, yes you do. How old is she now?”

Ollie glanced up at me with a bewildered expression in her big brown eyes. Faylene had that effect on people. Even toddlers. I smoothed one of Ollie’s wayward curls and said, “She’s a few months shy of two, and she mostly goes by the nickname Ollie.”

“Ollie? Well, if that isn’t the sweetest thing I’ve heard in a long while. When did you two get back to town? You were living down in Montgomery, right? Must not have been long, since I haven’t seen you at church or around town. How long had you been gone, Natalie? Four years now? Five? Your mama and daddy must be thrilled you’re home. I’m surprised they’re not singing from the rooftops.”

The older woman quieted, smiled, and cocked her head. I realized she was actually waiting for an answer to one of those questions. I chose the easiest.

“I’ve been back a few weeks now.” I had begrudgingly driven into town three weeks ago that very day, dragging my muffler and pride up Interstate 59. Both were beyond repair at this point.

“What’s your mama think of Anna Kate?” Faylene wiggled her dark eyebrows.

“Who’s Anna Kate?”

Faylene’s jaw dropped open, then snapped closed. “Anna Kate Callow? You haven’t heard . . . ?”

I’m sure I’d met Eden Callow at some point, but I didn’t remember her. I’d been only three years old when Eden left Wicklow. Her name, however, had been brought up often enough while I was grow-

ing up—as it was being cursed to the rafters. I knew Zee, but in passing and reputation only.

The Callows—and the café—were off-limits to any and all Lindens.

Which was why my trip here to the Blackbird Café was A Very Big Deal.

“Heard what?”

Faylene glanced between the café and me, and I could practically see a war being waged behind the woman’s blue eyes. Redness climbed her throat, making her skin splotchy.

I glanced at the café. I’d heard my parents whispering about a long-lost family member of Zee’s reopening the restaurant, but I hadn’t thought too much of it. Honestly, I hadn’t cared. All I wanted was blackbird pie. I hadn’t dared go inside to order a piece while Zee had been alive—that would have been an unforgiveable sin in my mother’s eyes, but now?

Just a minor sin.

Or so I hoped, for the sake of that tenuous peace.

I also hoped there was pie left by the time I screwed up some courage to order a piece. I hadn’t expected a crowd for the reopening. Locals were jammed inside, elbow to elbow, and there was a large gathering of people I didn’t recognize on the side lawn. With each of my passes in front of the restaurant, more and more people had arrived with cameras and lawn chairs.

Faylene pressed a hand to her flushed neck. “It’s just, ah . . . I think that she’s . . . Well, *the whole town* thinks that she’s your . . .” She coughed, then wrinkled her nose. “It’s probably best you meet Anna Kate. See her for yourself.”

“All right,” I said noncommittally. If I was going to eat a piece of the forbidden blackbird pie, I might as well meet a Callow while I was at it. Get all my transgressions out of the way in one fell swoop.

I simply needed to go inside and get it over with. Repercussions be damned.

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After a querulous conversation with the heavens, my mother would get over it.

Eventually.

Maybe.

Though Mama's deep freeze would likely return in full glacial force.

I held in a sigh at the mere thought of it. Seelie Earl Linden's preferred method of punishment was stone-cold silence. Truth be told, the frostiness was more effective than swatting me on the backside ever would have been. I'd like to say I had become immune to my mother's usage of the silent treatment over the years, but that would be a lie, and I didn't like liars.

If only I'd known I married one.

Ignoring the sudden ache in my chest, I picked an invisible piece of lint off the wide strap of my sundress.

"Good, good." Then, as if reading my mind, Faylene said, "I was right sorry to hear about your Matthew. Such a tragedy." Large hoop earrings swayed as she shook her head. "*Such* a tragedy. So young." She *tsked*. "How have you been coping since he's been gone? What's it been now? A year since the accident? Eighteen months? Thereabouts?"

This was precisely why I'd been in hiding the past three weeks. I didn't want to talk about Matthew.

Or the tragedy of it all.

Or the accident.

If it even had been an accident.

But this was Wicklow. People were duty bound to offer condolences and speak their minds. They wanted answers about what had happened. Answers I didn't have.

Yet.

Faylene rocked in her wedge sandals and tipped her head again. She was waiting for a response.

I flexed my fingers, forcing myself to relax my iron grip on the stroller. Still, my teeth clenched and my jaw ached as I said, "It's

been one year, seven months, three days, and two hours. Thereabouts.”

Faylene’s eyes widened. “Well . . . *Bless your heart.*”

Throwing an arm around me, Faylene dragged me close for a tight hug, squishing me against large breasts. I was suddenly enveloped by a lemon verbena scent and kindness.

Faylene patted my head. “You poor thing. I’ve been in your shoes. My Cyrus has been gone for a good many years now. If you ever need a shoulder to cry on, honey, just holler. If it’s one thing I’ve got, it’s good, strong shoulders.”

Tears stung my eyes, but I blinked them away. I’d sworn off crying the day my house had been foreclosed on, almost a year and a half ago. It was just . . . this woman had offered me more compassion and solace in five minutes than my own mother had in nineteen months. All Mama had given me was a floral arrangement on the day of Matt’s funeral.

“Thank you, Faylene. I appreciate that.” I did my best to extricate myself without fully losing my composure—something I’d worked hard on maintaining since Matt died.

“Sure thing, honey. Sure thing. If you ever need anything, you let me know. I’m happy to help.” She bent down to Ollie’s level. “I’d love to have this adorable little bit play with Lindy-Lou—that’s my grandbaby. She turned two last month. You remember my daughter Marcy?”

“Of course I remember Marcy.” It was a small town. Everyone knew everyone. And most of their business as well. Like how I knew Faylene had gone into a deep depression when Marcy decided to go to college in California, far away from her mother.

That Marcy left was no surprise whatsoever. If anyone needed a break from Faylene, it was her only daughter. However, most were shocked to their souls that Marcy had actually come home after she graduated college.

I wasn’t.

It seemed to me that all Wicklow girls tended to return to their

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roots—and their mothers—at some point or another. It simply took some more time than others.

“Lindy-Lou is Marcy’s little one. I keep her a couple days a week, and one more ain’t nothing, if you’re needing some time to yourself, Natalie. I’m the best babysitter around, you can ask anyone.”

Ollie stared at Faylene, wide-eyed and completely captivated. I suspected I looked the same. Faylene was a good reminder of why I moved back here. I wanted Ollie to have this kind of supportive community, and if that came with prying questions, so be it. It was worth the pain. “I can’t thank you enough for the generous offer, Faylene, but right now I don’t get out much.”

“You’ll get out more and more, I’m sure of it. There’s a lot of good you could do around here. Many of our committees are floundering—it isn’t any wonder why the town is too. We need some young blood to spice things up. The whole town could use an influx of youth. Doc mentioned once that you were on all kinds of committees and organizations down in Montgomery.”

I had been. Everything from the historical society and the Daughters of the Confederacy to the Junior League and church ministries. I’d dropped a lot of it when I finally got pregnant—something that had taken a good four and a half years of trying—and I wished now that I hadn’t cut myself off so completely. Hindsight was always bittersweet.

“You just holler when you need me,” Faylene said. “I’ll be here. Now, if that isn’t the most darling headband Ollie is wearing. I need one of those for Lindy-Lou. She’s cute as a button, but nearly as bald as old Mr. Lazenby.”

I had just finished Ollie’s headband last night. It was embellished with a coral peony made of satin and chiffon petals. Delicate yet fanciful. “I’d be happy to make one for Lindy-Lou.”

Faylene’s eyes flew open wide. “You made that headband? Of course you did. You surely inherited Seelie’s knack for sewing. That woman is magic with a needle. Her quilts are to die for. I’d love for

you to make Lindy-Lou a headband. No, two headbands. Three. Yes, three. Different colors, of course. How much are they?”

“I couldn’t charge you . . . they’ll be a gift.” It’s the least I could do after that hug.

“Nonsense! I insist.” She narrowed her gaze, studying my face for a good long moment. “How about this? You throw in the first one as a freebie, and I’ll pay for the other two.”

I wondered what Faylene had seen during her intense examination. The tattered shreds of my pride? The laughable amount in my bank account? Whatever it was, I was happy for the compromise. “That’s a deal.”

“Excellent.” She steepled her fingers under a big smile. “I can’t wait to see them on Lindy!”

“I can have them to you in a couple of—”

“Dog!” Ollie exclaimed. She leaned so far forward in her stroller that she almost toppled straight out onto the sidewalk. “Dog!”

I turned and saw a tall man walking toward us, a fancy camera with a long lens hung around his neck. At his heels was a beautiful brindle and white dog, some sort of Sheltie mix.

Faylene clapped her hands. “Oh! Lookie here. Cam Kolbaugh, as I live and breathe. You are a sight for these eyes! I haven’t seen you since what? Christmas? Give me some sugar!”

“You saw me last week at the movie on the courthouse lawn.” He kissed both her cheeks. “And you know it.”

“Oh! That’s right, I did see you there. My *mistake*.” She elbowed me while wiggling her eyebrows. “Gotta get in what kicks I can, you know what I mean? Cam is such a looker, I just can’t help myself.”

“Faylene, come on now,” he said. “You’re going to make me blush.”

“Not that we’d be able to see it,” she returned. “All that handsomeness hiding under those whiskers. It’s a shame. A damn shame. When are you going to shave that beard?”

I smiled at the sheer displeasure in Faylene’s voice. I kind of liked the man’s beard, not that I’d ever say so.

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Ollie saved him from answering when she squirmed excitedly and shouted, “Dog!”

The man crouched and spoke directly to Ollie. “His name is River. Do want to pet him?”

“Careful now,” I cautioned.

“Oh, don’t worry none. River’s gentle,” the man, Cam, reassured.

“I wasn’t so much worried for Ollie as I was for River. Ollie doesn’t know her own strength sometimes. She’s almost snatched me bald a couple of times.”

Cam stared at me for a moment, then laughed as he rubbed River’s ears. “He’ll be just fine.”

The dog licked Ollie’s hand, and she squealed as she reached out to tap River on his head. “Dog, dog, dog!”

“Look at that. Fast friends already.” Faylene faced me. “Do you know Cam, our resident mountain man?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Silly me! You wouldn’t, since you only just moved back. Cam moved down here from Tennessee ’bout a year ago.”

He stood up and stuck out a giant, callused hand. “Cam Kolbaugh.”

“Natalie Walker.” His hand swallowed mine, and I was surprised at his gentle handshake, considering his strength. It was as if he were taking extra care not to crush my fingers. “And this is Ollie.”

“A.k.a., Olivia Leigh,” Faylene said to the man. “But ain’t Ollie the cutest nickname you ever did hear? Natalie is Seelie and Doc Linden’s girl. She’s a widow, Natalie is. Lost her husband, Matthew Walker, a little more than one year, seven months, and three days ago. Thereabouts. A tragic boating accident.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Cam’s thick dark eyebrows dipped low. “My condolences.”

I glanced around for a manhole I could fall into. Head first. “Thank you.”

He nodded and bent to pet River, who was still being loved on by Ollie. Fortunately, the dog didn’t seem to mind toddler kisses one bit.

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To me, Faylene said, “Cam is Marcy’s brother-in-law. Her husband Josh’s brother. Big bear of a man, Josh is. You have to meet him. Despite him being one of Wicklow’s finest policemen, he has the sweetest disposition you ever did see.” She leaned in close. “Don’t tell him I said that. And Marcy runs the gift shop”—she spun and pointed to a storefront across the street, *Hodgepodge*—“over there. You need to drop in to see some of Cam’s photographs. He’s a wild-life photographer. Marcy sells his photos on consignment. They’re gorgeous. Stunning. No one can take a picture like Cam. He has quite the eye.”

I watched Cam’s face as Faylene gushed on, and was amused by the look of utter embarrassment sweeping across his features, tugging the fine lines around his hazel eyes and deepening the furrows on his forehead.

Looking back at the shop with its bright yellow awning, I wondered if Marcy was hiring. Top of my priority list, just beneath getting that blackbird pie, was finding a job. The shop was closed at the moment, but I made a note on my mental to-do list to stop by later on.

Faylene added, “Best you hurry, though, seeing as how Marcy’s not sure how much longer she can keep the shop open. She thought summertime would bring more visitors up this way to hike and bike, but it’s been slim pickings so far.”

“I’m sorry. Is there anything I can do to help?” My stomach ached with a sinking feeling as I crossed *Hodgepodge* off my list of potential employers. Talk about slim pickings—job openings around here were scarcer than tourists.

Faylene patted my hand. “You sweet thing. We surely appreciate your offer. We’ll get by, we always do.”

Cam straightened. “It’s been a pleasure, ladies, but I should probably get going. I’m on assignment.”

“Oh? Do tell!” Faylene rubbed her hands together.

Cam wrapped the leash around his hand. “There’s been a sighting of some rare birds behind the café, and the news is spreading like

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wildfire through the birding community. A bird-watching friend of mine contacted me to snap some shots. No big deal, but I should be on my way. The lighting's good right now."

"You mean the blackbirds?" Faylene asked. "Shoo, you've got time. They're not usually out in the daytime. Come back a bit before midnight to set up."

"You know of these birds?" he asked.

"Cam," Faylene said with a cock to her hip, "everyone in Wicklow knows about the blackbirds, not counting you, obviously. You really need to come out of the mountains a little more often."

He glanced at me, and I said, "The blackbirds have been here all my life. Midnight till one in the morning. They sing the prettiest songs you'll ever hear."

Suspicion laced his tone. "That's not normal, the midnight thing, not the songs."

Faylene said, "Sugar pie, the blackbirds are normal around here. I can't hardly believe they're causing such a fuss after all these years." She stood on tiptoes. "But I say, never look a gift horse in the mouth. Or birder, in this case. I best let these visitors know that Hodgedodge will be opening at eleven."

"Ollie and I should really get going too," I said, eyeing the café. "It was nice to meet you, Cam. See you soon, Faylene."

"Yes, yes!" Faylene said. "Very soon. And you should get together with Marcy sometime, with the girls. Your little one and Lindy-Lou would get on like wildfire."

A friend would be nice. I had suspected coming home would be difficult but thought I'd adjust fairly quickly. Fall into old patterns. Routines. Go back to the way things had been before. Go back to the way *I* was before.

I should have realized that was impossible.

Pain changed people.

I couldn't go back to the way I'd been, because I wasn't the same person who'd left.

All of which reminded me why I needed that piece of blackbird

pie so badly. I needed the answers it would give me. I wanted peace. Not only for my sake, but for Ollie's, too. I wanted to be the best mother I could be to my little girl. That meant I needed to find a way to heal my troubled heart and mind, so I didn't turn out like my own mother, who'd been lost somewhere in a haze of anger and grief for decades, oblivious to anything but her own pain.

Reaching down, I tucked one of Ollie's loose fawn-colored curls back under the headband. "Say goodbye, Ollie."

"Bye! Dog!" Ollie cried out, waving madly.

Cam offered a wave and River thumped his tail.

I spun the stroller around, took a few steps toward the café, and froze.

I needn't have worried that Faylene would blab my whereabouts to my mother. Because Mama was *here*. Arms folded, she stood rooted in front of the café, staring inside.

Maybe if I backed up slowly, I might be able to make a clean getaway . . .

Mama's head came up sharply, then snapped to the right as if sensing my presence.

Busted.

I tried to mask a wince as Mama marched over. Seelie Earl Linden looked perfectly put together, as always. Flowy linen slacks, a crisp white blouse, leather sandals, a large white sunhat that covered most of her shoulder-length wavy white hair that was shot through with strands of her original coppery color, dark sunglasses, and her double strand of pearls. "Olivia Leigh's eyes are simply precious when she squints just so, and her skin is turning such a lovely shade of brown, don't you think?"

Mama never used Ollie's nickname, claiming it a ridiculous name for a girl, and that people were going to think she was a boy.

As if that were possible with her long hair, bow lips, arched eyebrows, and button nose. Not to mention the skorts she wore, the pink lace-trimmed shirt with her monogram on the pocket, and matching pink sandals.

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“Gamma! Hihi!” Ollie said, waving.

I didn’t bother mentioning that I’d lathered Ollie in sunscreen or that she had flung her sunglasses to the ground six times already before I gave up and tucked them into the diaper bag before they broke. It wouldn’t matter. By the end of the day, a wide-brimmed toddler-size sunhat would be delivered to the little house along with the expectation that it be used.

“Hello there, sweet pea.” Mama bent down to grasp Ollie’s outstretched fingers, then kissed her forehead.

My heart wrenched at the affection Mama bestowed upon Ollie. It was something that I hadn’t experienced from my mother in a good, long while. While the truth of that stung, I was thankful Ollie didn’t know her grandmother’s coldness.

And she never would, if I could do anything about it.

Peace, I reminded myself. *Peace.*

Mama said, “You’re out and about early.”

Even though the statement was directed at Ollie—and wasn’t a question—Mama lifted her head, clearly expecting a response from me.

“We’re . . . off to the library.” Not quite a lie. Ollie and I *had* planned to go to the library this morning. After the pie. “I’m surprised to see *you* here.”

In all my years, I’d never seen my mother within a hundred-foot radius of the Blackbird Café. Mama took great pains to avoid this section of the street, going acres out of her way so as to not even lay an accidental glance on the old stone building.

Mama’s hand flew to her pearls. “I was passing by on my way to a Refresh meeting and stopped to see what was causing the racket.”

It was a good story, but I didn’t buy it. Though Mama *was* the chairwoman of the restoration committee designed to revitalize the community, nicknamed Refresh, the meetings were usually held at Coralee Dabadie’s house, two blocks away. “Passing by” here required quite the elaborate detour. Besides, Mama hadn’t said one word about my proximity to the establishment. Highly suspicious.

She gestured to the crowd on the café's side lawn. "What *is* going on? Who are these people? Surely they're not here for the reopening."

Amid the chaos of the packed café, a stranger stood out, weaving among the tables with a tray in hand. A woman, about the same age I was, give or take a couple of years. A stranger, yet familiar. Was that Anna Kate Callow? She didn't look much like Zee, a tiny blonde with straight hair usually tied into a braid, who had an affinity for flowy skirts, long scarves, and dangly earrings. Anna Kate was tall, maybe as tall as my five-foot-eight, and had chestnut-colored curly hair. She wore jeans, cuffed to mid-calf, and plain purple T-shirt. Not an earring to be seen. "It's the blackbirds. The birding community is fascinated with them. Supposedly, they're rare. The birds. Not the birding community."

I was rambling. Mama had that effect on me.

She glanced inside the café, and her slender fingers whitened as she tightened her grip on her pearls—the pearls that my brother (with Daddy's financial help) had given Mama for her very first Mother's Day, more than forty years ago.

Sadly, I didn't remember Andrew James Linden, golden child, the pride and joy of my family—and Wicklow. I was three when he died at just eighteen years old in a car crash. I'd been what some called an *oops* baby, a surprise my parents hadn't been expecting so late in life. Apparently Mama had been over the moon at the news of my impending arrival, even though everyone around here knew Seelie Earl Linden didn't care much for surprises.

It was a happiness that vanished forever the day AJ died.

Mama scoffed. "The birds? Foolishness."

"Seelie! Knock me over with a feather, seeing you here at the café!" Faylene said brightly as she approached. "I suppose you heard the rumors . . . Quite shocking, isn't it?"

With a brittle closed-mouth smile, Mama stared at Faylene. "I'm not sure what you mean."

Patches of red appeared on Faylene's neck again. "The rumors about Anna Kate . . . ?"

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Mama kept staring, her lips pressed into a thin, frigid line.

Faylene glanced between Mama and me, me and Mama. “I, ah, need to be going.” She pointed left, then right. “Good to see you both.”

“Do give my best to Marcy, won’t you?” Mama said, saccharine sweet.

“I surely will.” Faylene called over her shoulder as she scurried off.

“What was that all about?” I asked as soon as she was out of ear-shot.

“You know I abhor gossip, Natalie,” Mama said dismissively.

Baffled, I glanced around. It seemed like everyone stared at us, including the people in the café.

Mama said, “I’m leaving. Are you coming with me? The library is on the way to Coralee’s house.”

I swallowed hard. Choices. I could either stand my ground, go inside, and get the piece of pie and answers I craved . . . or keep the fragile peace in my broken family.

“We’re coming,” I said, stifling a sigh.

Peace was worth leaving with my mother right that minute. But come tomorrow morning . . . I would be back for that pie.

Maybe then I’d also figure out why everyone was so interested in Anna Kate Callow.

3



“When did you first notice the blackbirds?” the reporter asked.

Bow Barthelemy kicked out long, thin legs. “They’ve been here as long as I have.”

“How long have you worked for the café?”

“Twenty-five years, but the birds have been here longer. Nearly a century, I’ve heard.”

The reporter rolled his eyes and scribbled a note. “Are there always twenty-four birds like in that old nursery rhyme? ‘Four and twenty blackbirds, Baked in a pie—’”

“When the pie was opened, The birds began to sing.” Bow finished the quote. “I know it. Zee once said those birds were probably relatives.”

“She was obviously joking. Right?”

“Zee never joked about the blackbirds.”

Unsure what to say to that, the reporter tapped his pen, then gestured wide. “You don’t find all this strange?”

“Not at all, but what’s strange to me could look mighty different to you.” He stood up, pushed the chair in. “I need to be gettin’ back to work. You want a refill on that blackberry tea?”

“Yes, please. Best damn tea I’ve ever had.”

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Anna Kate

“I heard tell you’re heading off to medical school soon, young lady,” Mr. Lazenby said. His bottom lip pushed outward and his jaw set as if bracing for a fight.

Skirting his chair, I picked up empty plates and gathered discarded silverware from a nearby table. I wasn’t surprised by his nosiness, as it seemed to be a community-wide affliction, almost as prevalent as the lack of respect for personal space. People had been giving me hugs all morning, my stiffness not the least bit of a deterrent. Did no one have boundaries around here? “That’s right. Classes start in August.”

It had taken me seven long years to complete my pre-med undergrad. Between switching schools twice, taking time off after my mom’s death, and running out of tuition money . . . it was a miracle I’d graduated at all. Truthfully, I’d have quit altogether, except for a promise I’d made to my mother a long time ago.

“*Hmmph*,” Mr. Lazenby said, staring long and hard at me.

It looked like he had dressed for a special occasion this morning, wearing pressed trousers, a crisp white button-down, and a red and white checkered bowtie, but I’d come to recognize it was his normal, everyday attire.

He’d been here since the doors opened at eight and didn’t look like he planned to leave anytime soon, even though it was now well after ten. Sitting prim and proper, with his back ramrod straight and his napkin on his lap, he glared at his fork.

“Something wrong?” I asked.

“This pie doesn’t taste right.”

“Otis Lazenby,” Jena Barthelemy called out from the kitchen, “I know you’re not insulting my cooking. That’s Zee’s recipe for apple pie, and I’ll have you know it’s a ribbon-winner.”

Jena apparently had bionic hearing, because I wasn’t sure how she’d heard him over the hum in the room.

“It might be Zee’s recipe,” he said, “but this pie don’t taste like the pies Miss Zee made.”

“We can’t be changing the fact that Zee’s gone to glory, can we?” Jena walked over to us. “God bless her soul. Times are changing, and we need to change right along with them, don’t we?”

“But I’ll still dream tonight, right?” he asked, panic threading through his high voice.

“I don’t know. Time will tell, won’t it?” Jena said.

A wave of anxiety washed over me.

While on earth, it’s the job of us guardians to tend to the trees, nurture them, and gather their love to bake into pies to serve those who mourn, those left behind. You see, the bonds of love are only strengthened when someone leaves this earth, not diminished. Some have trouble understanding that, so it’s the pie that determines who’s in need of a message, a reminding, if you will; it’s the love in the pie that connects the two worlds; and it’s a tree keeper who delivers the message.

Yesterday, Jena had taken on the task of making the blackbird pies, and I should have known they wouldn’t be quite right. A *guardian* was supposed to bake the pies. Now that Zee was gone, making the pies fell on me as the only surviving Callow. Unfortunately, I didn’t think Mr. Lazenby would get the message he longed for, but I was hoping by some miracle that he would.

“*Hmmph.*” He pouted at the fork before shoving it into his mouth.

“Now tell all, Anna Kate. Did you always want to be a doctor?” Pebbles Lutz asked.

Pebbles, her white hair piled high, sat across from Mr. Lazenby at the ten-seat communal table that took up most of the dining room. This morning, I’d seen her cast more than one longing glance his way, but he seemed oblivious to her attention . . . and affection.

“For as long as I remember,” I said, dodging the heart of the question, the *want* part, as I collected more plates.

The café had once been a carriage house Zee had converted many decades ago into a restaurant downstairs and living quarters up. A

glass door and big bay windows at the front of the café let in an abundance of light. The floors were the same dark pine as the stairs, and the walls were covered in white-washed pine, as was the ceiling. With a fairly open layout—only a half wall separated the cooking and dining areas—it felt as though this was a family kitchen rather than a business.

The whole space was light and bright and airy, but right now it felt more than a little claustrophobic. All eight tables were full, every seat taken. Several people stood near the door outside, waiting to come in. Some I recognized as neighbors. Some I didn't, such as the young woman with the baby who kept passing by, staring inside forlornly.

Hands full, I headed back to the kitchen, to drop the dishes at the sink and take a minute to simply breathe. It was overwhelming to be the focus of so much attention.

"You're doing fine, just fine," Bow said from his spot at the stove. His normally pale face was infused with redness from standing over the stove all morning, and concern flashed in his light blue-gray eyes.

"Especially seeing as you have no restaurant experience," Jena added. "I'm impressed."

I decided she impressed easily, because I was a hot mess. I knew my way around a regular kitchen—cooking and baking were second nature to me—but I knew nothing about working in a commercial kitchen or waitressing.

I'd already broken three plates, spilled more water than I cared to admit, and was limping—my feet burned like the devil. "Is it always this busy?"

"It's a sight busier than usual." Bow pulled a basket from the double fryer. "Between the birdwatchers and . . . you. People are curious."

There was a slight arch to his back, and I wondered if that's where his nickname had come from. His body looked like a bow missing

its arrow. He emptied the basket onto a paper plate. Crispy hash browns spilled out, glistening and steaming, and I dashed them with salt before they cooled.

“I know they are.” I’d expected a crowd. But not quite one this size.

Bow flipped a row of pancakes on the built-in griddle on the top-of-the-line six-burner gas range. It was clear Zee had recently done updates to the kitchen and had spared no expense doing so.

“We can close up early if you want,” Jena chimed in. “You’re the boss. Nobody’s going to argue.” Hope sparked in her brown eyes as she cut biscuits from thick dough. She stood at the marble-topped prep island, which was covered in a thin coat of flour. Jena, too. The white powder dusted her dark, plump cheeks and thin, straight eyebrows. Black hair threaded with silver was pulled up into a high, coiled bun.

“That’s okay. I can handle it.” At least I could for another four hours.

Jena dusted off her hands. “You’ve got Zee’s spunk, that’s for sure.”

Jena and Bow Barthelemy had welcomed me to the Blackbird Café with wide open—if not floury—arms. While they seemed to know everything about me and Mom, they tended to reveal their past to me much like they cooked. A dash of this, a dollop of that. A light-handed sprinkling of history. They were in their middle fifties and both had worked here for decades, coming on board after my mom left town. Their job titles were a bit vague, but it seemed to me that they were *everything*. Cooks, cleaners, gardeners, servers, cashiers, and maintenance.

I glanced out the double windows over the deep farmer’s sink, across the yard to the mulberry trees. Fluttering leaves made it look like the trees were fanning themselves in the morning heat. Mulberries, still pale and unripe, hung from thin stems. Bow referred to the fruit as blackberry’s skinny cousin—they shared the same pebbled skin and coloring. Never having eaten a mulberry, I’d picked a

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pinkish one a few days ago and winced at the sourness. According to Jena, the berries wouldn't be fully ripe for another three weeks or so, when they turned fully black. Only then would their sweet yet mild flavor shine through.

"Zee would be right proud seeing you in here, working your tail off." Jena's smile was bright against her dark skin as she glanced over at me.

She had a slow, melodious way of speaking that I found slightly mesmerizing. Swallowing back a sudden rush of emotion, I said, "Thank you for that."

I tended to keep people at arm's distance because it was easier—emotionally—for me when I had to eventually leave them. It seemed as though Mom and I were always packing up our lives and moving on. But somehow, in the short week I'd been in Wicklow, Bow and Jena had already slipped past my defenses. Maybe it had been the way they'd welcomed me whole-heartedly, or perhaps the kindness in their eyes, or their endless patience as they taught me to run the café. Or maybe it was me, too spent with grief and the mental toll of having to run a business I knew nothing about, in a place where I knew no one, to put up much of a fight where affection was concerned. They were the closest thing I had to family right now.

Jena made a noise that sounded like a trill as she put a tray of biscuits into one of the wide double ovens. "I call it like I see it, sugar."

I appreciated that. Taking a moment to collect myself, I breathed in the various aromas spicing the air. The dark-roast coffee, vanilla, green onion, lemon, cinnamon, thyme, and a hint of yeast underneath it all. The scents reminded me of Zee and soothed my aching heart.

Pulling back my shoulders, I grabbed a fresh pot of coffee for top-ups, and headed back to the dining room and into the line of fire, trying not to slosh coffee all over the customers.

Faylene Wiggins had come in while I was in the kitchen and now sat next to Mr. Lazenby. I had met her at Zee's funeral and guessed her to be in her late fifties or early sixties. She had short dark hair,

inquisitive blue eyes, and a way of speaking I wasn't sure I'd ever get used to. At Zee's funeral, she kept close to me, fending off the nosiest of questions from others, and had gifted me with not one but three zucchini loaves.

She held out her mug to me and said, "It's so strange. I've known Zee Callow my whole life long. We grew up together, us two. I've seen her through an ill-fated marriage with your granddaddy, her opening this café, her birthing your mama, and probably saw her most every day of my life . . . yet she never said a word about you." She looked at me expectantly.

I topped off Mr. Lazenby's mug, not sure if there had been a question to answer, but I noted that she was the first person to mention my grandfather. He'd been a traveling salesman who'd stopped in town to hawk insurance plans. Zee claimed she'd been swept off her feet by his charm and good looks, and it wasn't long before they drove up to a chapel in Gatlinburg for a quickie wedding. It took only a few weeks for the enchantment to fade, however, which happened to coincide with his itch to hit the road again. He gave Zee an ultimatum: him or Wicklow. He left town soon after the divorce was finalized, never to be seen again. By that time, he'd known that my mother had been on the way but had driven off anyway.

Zee often said my mother's desire to travel the world was in her DNA, but insisted her roots were here, in Wicklow, and that this town was where she belonged.

Anna Kate darlin', promise me you'll never marry a man who doesn't respect the importance of your roots. For where your roots are, your heart is.

"It's strange, isn't it, Anna Kate?" Faylene said. "That we didn't know about you?"

I knew exactly why no one in town, other than my mom and Zee, knew I existed. The Lindens. Instead of answering, I shrugged.

She frowned. "If you don't mind my asking, honey, where've you been hiding all these years?"

That I could answer. "A little bit of everywhere across the country,

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mostly up north,” I said, refilling mugs as I went around the table. “I moved around a lot growing up. Mom was a traveling nurse.”

A lot was an understatement. I’d moved at least twice a year from the time I was born until I turned eighteen and started college. After that, it stretched to a year, a year and a half. Mom had tried to stay put many times, create a home, but old habits were hard to break. Endlessly restless, she wasn’t one to ever sit still for long.

“Up north?” Pebbles said, her lips pursed. “Bless your heart.”

I wasn’t sure why it seemed like she was offering condolences. “I’ve been in Boston for the past two years,” I added. It was the longest I’d ever lived anywhere, even though I’d changed my living situation four times during that time. “Finishing up my degree.”

In-state tuition fees were the only reason I was still in Massachusetts, or I would have moved on by now. I’d yet to find a place that felt like home, something I wanted very much.

“I heard that,” Faylene said. “I thought you’d have more of an accent, truth be told. I fully expected you to sound like a Kennedy. I always did like them Kennedys. Especially that John-John. He was just the cutest thing. Those eyes . . .” She sighed. “But you don’t talk anything like them.”

The disappointment in her voice amused me. “I’ve never stayed long enough in one place to develop an accent of any kind.”

Pebbles said, “My sympathies on Eden’s passing, Anna Kate. It was a sad day around these parts when Zee shared the news. A blood clot, I heard.”

That’s what the doctors had said, but I always suspected that Mom’s broken heart finally gave out on her. It was honestly quite amazing it had lasted so long—I suspected a big part of it had died along with my father that fateful day so long ago. The rest of it finally caught up.

A round of murmured condolences swept across the room, and I tightened my grip on the coffee pot. “Thank you all.”

“I’m not the least bit surprised Eden became a traveling nurse,” Pebbles said, sipping from her mug. “She always had wanderlust in

her heart, that one, even when she was a bitty thing. She forever had her nose stuck deep in travel guides.”

Faylene said, “True enough. Everyone around here knew she wasn’t long for Wicklow. She and AJ had such big plans for their future . . .” She slid an appraising look toward me. “No one was shocked when she left town so soon after the accident.”

“Ooh, especially with the way Seelie Linden behaved toward her,” Pebbles said, *tsking* loudly.

My heartbeat kicked up, and I fought the urge to pull out a chair and sit down. All my life, I’d longed to know the real story behind my mother’s leaving this town. The juicy bits. The gossip behind Seelie accusing my mother of *murder*. All the things my Mom—and Zee—would never tell me. Whenever I pressed them for more information, for details of why Seelie would make such an accusation, all I ever heard was the crash had been an accident and that was that.

It didn’t help matters that my mother had no recollection of that day at all—she’d suffered a head injury in the accident that had wiped out her short-term memory.

But—and it was a big but—I always noticed on the rare times my mom talked about my dad and the accident, she always had a distant look in her eye, and the corners of her lips would tip downward, like they did when she wasn’t quite telling me everything.

I suspected there was more to the story of the crash, and now that I was here in Wicklow, I realized I wanted to know the whole truth of what happened the day of the car crash.

Most of all, though, I wanted to know more about my father. Mom had kept a lot of him to herself as well. It had been too painful for her to share much, and I’d never pushed hard, because seeing her cry tore me apart. But now? Now, the time had come.

“Order up,” Bow called out, thumping his hand on the counter-top. He preferred that method to using a bell, a sound he claimed to despise.

“Excuse me,” I reluctantly said to the table.

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I picked up the plates Bow had set out and turned to see an older woman outside the door, staring in. Big hat, sunglasses. She didn't look like she planned to come inside—even though she blocked the entrance. She simply gawked.

Probably another local, curious to lay eyes on the mysterious Anna Kate Callow. It seemed I had my own rubberneckerers. I bit back a smile as I set plates in front of a pair of birders, who'd come in for a snack.

"What kind of doctor are you thinking to become, Anna Kate?" Pebbles asked as I passed by. "A family doc, like your granddaddy?"

I wiped my hands on my apron. "My granddaddy?" I asked as innocently as I could manage.

She forked a piece of ham slathered in red-eye gravy and said, "Doc Linden? One of the finest doctors this town ever did see. It'll be a darn shame when he retires."

A hush fell over the restaurant, except for the table of birders who seemed oblivious to everything except their eggs and sweet potato hash.

Pebbles suddenly turned ghostly white and dropped her fork. "I, ah, I mean . . ." She glanced around, obviously looking for someone to take the foot out of her mouth.

According to my mother, I was the spitting image of my father, Andrew James Linden, with my curly dark ginger hair, wide downturned eyes, and deep dimples. It was no surprise at all that everyone here saw the resemblance too, especially the older folks who would have known him personally. My likeness to him was one of the many reasons Wicklow had been off-limits my whole life long.

"I'm not sure what I'll practice just yet. I have some time before I need to decide," I answered, dancing around the massive elephant in the room. Everyone might suspect I was a Linden, but I wasn't ready to confirm the rumors quite yet. Not until I figured out how to deal with the Linden family, something I'd been worrying about all week long. I still didn't have a plan.

When my mother left Wicklow, she packed everything she could

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fit into her car, including an all-consuming hatred for the Lindens. We'd carted the animosity from town to town, unpacked it, and lovingly tended it until we moved again. After she died, I started carrying the load for her.

As much as I was curious about my father's side of my family—and I was—I couldn't simply forget how they had treated my mother. Of how they had accused her of *murder*, even after the car crash had been ruled an accident. How they shamed her. How they had barred her from my father's funeral, not allowing her to say goodbye to the only man she'd ever love.

And how she had vowed the day she left Wicklow that they'd never hurt me the way they had her. Which meant no contact with me. Not ever.

But now, I was here.

Avoiding the Lindens while I was in Wicklow these next couple of months wasn't feasible, considering this town was roughly the size of a postage stamp. I had tried to imagine what I'd do or say when I finally ran into them, almost to the point of driving myself crazy. Finally, to save my sanity, I decided I'd wing it. Because there was simply no way to prepare for a meeting like that.

Mr. Lazenby banged a hand on the table. "But what about this place? The café? As Zee's heir, you're the new owner, am I right to think?"

Everyone—including the birders—watched me expectantly.

I didn't quite know how to answer him. I wasn't the heir . . . yet.

Not waiting for a reply, he kept talking. "What's going to happen to the café if you're headed off to become a doctor?"

A sorrowful Mr. Lazenby had awoken me at the crack of dawn these past few days while the café had been closed, yearning for blackbird pie. As I studied him, I was grateful not to see oceans of tears in his rheumy eyes, but there was no mistaking the apprehension lurking in the murky blue depths as he worried about the future . . . and the sweet connection he had to his wife, who'd died more than a decade ago.

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“Will there still be pie?” he asked, running a handkerchief over his bald head.

My chest ached. I simply didn’t have the heart to break the news to him that I planned to sell the place as soon as my mandatory two months of running the café were up and put any proceeds toward the cost of medical school.

“Well?” he demanded.

“I don’t know if there will be pie.” I hadn’t thought that far ahead.

Mr. Lazenby narrowed his cloudy gaze on me. “Are you sure you’re Zee’s granddaughter? I’m starting to have my doubts. You didn’t even bake the pies!” he said, his words harsh and cutting.

Jena rushed to my side, a pot of coffee in hand. “Where’re your manners, Otis? Hush now. Let the girl alone for a minute. All these questions have my head spinning and they aren’t even directed my way. Anna Kate, why don’t you take your break now? Get off your feet for a bit, get some fresh air.” To the table, she said, “Who wants more coffee?”

“*Hmmph.*” Mr. Lazenby crossed his arms over his chest.

“Thanks, Jena.” Fresh air was exactly what I needed to clear my mind, to remind myself why I was here and putting myself through this torture. I headed for the garden.

Bow held open the back door for me. “You want a snack? I can whip something up real quick.”

“No thanks, Bow. I’ll be right back. I just need a minute to myself.”

“Take as long as you want. Jena and I can hold down the fort.”

Stepping outside, I closed my eyes and leaned against the screen door frame.

The scent of mint was strong, undercut with another fragrance I didn’t recognize at first. Then it came to me: honeysuckle. Strange only because I hadn’t seen any growing in the yard.

Puzzled, I opened my eyes and nearly jumped out of my skin when I spotted a young woman sitting on the deck steps.

She jumped too, leaping gracefully to her feet. “Sorry, ma’am! I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Not the damned “ma’am” again. My God.

“Are you one of the bird people?” I asked. I didn’t think so—not with the way she was dressed in threadbare Daisy Dukes and black tank top, her feet bare and caked with dirt.

Tall and thin as a willow, she stared with big blue eyes from a deeply tanned face dotted with freckles. Long dark hair was pulled back, braided along the crown of her head. The rest hung in loose waves down her back. Cradling a twig basket in her skinny arms, she held it as if it were a fragile newborn. An embroidered tea towel was tucked protectively inside the basket.

Those impossibly big eyes blinked in confusion. “The bird people?”

I guessed her to be fifteen or so as I gestured to the side yard. “They’re birders, watching for a glimpse of the blackbirds.”

She turned, and I realized the honeysuckle scent was coming from her. A lotion or shampoo.

“Oh! No, ma’am. I’m not one of them.” She glanced toward the mulberry trees. “I’m so sorry about Miss Zee.” Tears pooled in her eyes, but she blinked them away. “She was a good friend to me.”

“Thank you . . . ?”

“Oh! I’m Summer. Summer Pavegeau.”

“I’m Anna Kate Callow,” I said, though I had a feeling she already knew exactly who I was. I motioned to two rocking chairs on the deck. “Come sit. My feet are killing me.”

She followed me to the rockers, her sure footsteps soundless on the rotting deck boards. Carefully, she sat, still embracing the basket. “Your flats are cute, but probably not the best if you’re going to be waitressing. Zee wore Crocs. Swore by them.”

I made a face. “I am not going to wear Crocs.”

Summer smiled. “Did you pack tennis shoes, at least?”

I’d packed everything. “I have an old pair somewhere. I’ll pull them out.”

“Good idea.”

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It was my turn to smile—because it had been *her* idea. “How long have you known Zee?”

Summer’s fingers, I noticed, were purple. Blackberry stains. On one of our secret excursions, Zee had taken me blackberry picking one summer when Mom and I lived in Ohio. There had been no hiding those stains from Mom, but much to my surprise, she hadn’t made too much of a fuss when she caught us purple-handed. Probably because blackberries were her favorite fruit. Instead, she’d smiled and asked Zee if she’d make cobbler with the berries we’d collected.

It was the best cobbler I’d ever eaten.

“All my life. Eighteen years now. I was born and raised here in Wicklow.”

Eighteen? I’d never have thought that old—something I didn’t mention. No teenager wanted to know she looked years younger.

“I helped Miss Zee tend her garden a couple of days a week during the warmer months. She told me how much she missed you and wished you could come here.”

I raised an eyebrow. “She talked about me?”

“All the time. Showed me pictures, too. Oh, don’t worry! I never told another living soul about you. It was mine and Zee’s secret. You have her smile—she was right proud of that, claimed it was her best feature.” She stared at her dirty feet. “I always thought her best feature was her big heart, but no one asked me.”

I studied her, catching the quiver of her chin as she fought to keep emotion in check. Summer Pavegeau must have been a very good friend for Zee to share such a secret. “Just so you know, I agree with you.”

She gave a short, firm nod.

“What have you got there?” I gestured to the basket, hoping desperately it wasn’t a zucchini loaf.

Carefully she pulled back the tea towel, revealing a dozen brown eggs. “Miss Zee was a regular customer, but I wasn’t sure if you were needing any for the café.”

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Although there were two crates of eggs sitting on the kitchen counter I didn't hesitate to say, "Of course. We can always use eggs. What's your going rate?"

"Two dollars a dozen and a piece of blackbird pie."

The addition of the pie caught me off-guard, and I looked more closely at her. That's when I saw the familiar look of grief trying to hide in her eyes. "That's a bargain if I ever heard one."

I pulled a stack of ones from my apron pocket—tip money—and peeled off two singles. As much as I wanted to hand over the whole wad, I didn't. Instinctively I knew Summer wouldn't have taken the money for nothing.

She tentatively reached out with her stained fingers and said, "Thank you, ma'am."

My teeth clenched. "Please don't call me ma'am. I beg of you. Anna Kate is just fine."

"Do you think you'll be needing another dozen tomorrow . . . Anna Kate?"

I ignored the fact that she sounded physically pained to say my name instead of "ma'am," and said, "If you've got them, I'll take them. I see you've been working with blackberries. I could use some of those, too, if you have extra." Suddenly, I wanted to make cobbler.

A shimmer of excitement flashed in her eyes. "How much are you wanting? A pint? Quart? Gallon?"

"A quart is fine. I'm willing to pay top dollar, considering the thorns and snakes."

"Oh, the snakes don't bother me none. I like them more than people sometimes."

Summer might look young for her age, but it was becoming clear to me that there was an old soul behind those big blue eyes. I stood up. "Let me get your pie. I'll be back in a second."

I turned to find Bow standing in the doorway. He had a piece of pie already boxed, as if he'd done this before. He handed the box to me, then said, "I didn't want to interrupt, but you've got a visitor insistent on seein' you."

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The cautious look in his eyes made me nervous. “Who is it?”

He ran a hand down his trimmed beard. “Doc Linden. You ready to see him?”

Was I ready? No. No, I wasn’t. Why the hell did I think winging it was a suitable idea?

“Anna Kate?” he said. “I can send him away if it’s too soon . . .”

I didn’t think I’d ever be ready, so I might as well get it over with. I sucked in a breath and let it out slowly. “It’s okay. Can you send him out here, please? I don’t really want an audience hanging on our every word.”

“Sure thing.”

My nerves were running wild as I turned around to say goodbye to Summer and to give her the piece of pie.

But she was already gone.