

the
Book
Charmer

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KAREN HAWKINS



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To Cap'n Hot Cop, who sat with me on a snowy day
in front of a roaring fire in the music room of Blantyre,
a romantic Gilded Age mansion in the Berkshires,
debating plot points for *The Book Charmer*,
the book of my heart.

Nate, you are my magic.

PROLOGUE

Sarah

DOVE POND, NC
JULY 21, 2001

On the Saturday after her seventh birthday, a book spoke to Sarah May Dove. If she'd been older, she might have been surprised or even shocked, but as she was only seven and still a stubborn and devoted believer in Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, and the Easter Bunny, she didn't even blink.

In fact, after a moment's thought, she decided that books always spoke inside the quiet of one's head, although usually only while being read. So hearing a book speak didn't faze her in the slightest.

Besides, she was a Dove, and everyone knew the Dove family was special. Every chance her mom got, she proudly pointed out that when the Doves had seven daughters, as they did now, good things happened to their hometown of Dove Pond.

Mom wasn't just bragging; history had proven this true. In 1735, a seventh Dove daughter was born to the Dove family. When Jane Dove, the fourth oldest daughter, turned seven years of age, the town was suffering under a severe, crippling drought. Jane, a softhearted

child who loved animals, cried at the thought of all the thirsty farm animals. As her tears fell, clouds gathered, and it began to rain. From then on, every time Jane cried, it rained. It was said that whenever local farmers wanted it to rain, they would bring Jane onions. And when they wanted sunshine, they brought her cake.

In 1829, another seventh daughter arrived. The oldest, Mary Dove, was said to have hair the color of spun gold and a propensity for finding lost jewelry, much to the delight of the townswomen. One hot summer day, while wading in the creek that wandered through town, Mary kicked over a rock and uncovered a large gold nugget. Thus began the Dove Pond gold rush. The gold rush lasted a remarkable thirty-two years, long enough to whip up a building frenzy that left behind the marble-fronted town hall, eight brand-new brick buildings on Main Street, a new school, and several streets of stately homes, all of which still stood today.

Sarah, her sisters, and her mother lived in one of those houses, a sprawling structure with so many creaks and leaks that it couldn't keep out the smothering summer heat no matter how many window air conditioners they added. Because of this, every Saturday throughout the summer, Sarah and her sisters retreated to the deliciously cool air-conditioning in the Dove Pond Library.

Sarah loved those trips to the library. As she was the youngest by five years and had no interest in either makeup or boys, the only things her sisters cared about, she filled her days with books. Every Saturday, after their mother dropped them off, Sarah's sisters would cluster around the fashion magazines, whispering and giggling, while she roamed the aisles alone looking for books about dragons.

Sarah wished with all her heart that dragons were real instead of existing only between the pages of certain books. Fortunately for her, there were lots of books with dragons. Although only seven, she'd been reading since she was three, a fact her mother told anyone who would listen. Sarah was a voracious reader, and she'd found friends hiding between the pages of books. For her, the trips to the library

meant more than the refreshing burst of air-conditioning. They were life.

On the Saturday after her seventh birthday, Sarah ignored her sisters' giggles as they clustered around one of their stupid magazines and she headed for the Young Adult section. She had just walked past the glass display case that contained relics explaining the history of Dove Pond, when a dusty, paper-rattled voice rang out.

Read me.

The words echoed inside her head, without true sound, yet with a presence so keen that Sarah stopped in her tracks, her gaze locked on the glass case.

A small book propped in the center of the case rustled impatiently.

Read me now.

Sarah dropped her backpack on the floor and walked to the case. She placed her hands flat on the cool, smooth glass and stared at the book, an old cracked-leather journal that rested among some other early artifacts in a display about the founding of Dove Pond.

She knew this particular book, even though she'd never seen it outside of the case. It had been written in 1702 by Charlotte Dove, the seventh daughter of the founding family of Dove Pond and one of Sarah's ancestors. Every Founder's Day, portions of it were reprinted in the local paper. Sarah knew the oft-repeated passages well, especially the few paragraphs where fourteen-year-old Charlotte Dove described in breathtaking detail the exact moment the Dove family had crossed the crest of Black Mountain, North Carolina, to look down into the green valley below. There they'd seen a single pond glistening in the morning sun like a sapphire set on a bed of emerald velvet and had decided that here was where they'd stay.

And so Dove Pond had been born.

There's more to the story, the book said.

"Like what?" Sarah asked.

You'll know when you read me.

Sarah considered this. She was allowed to check out only two books at a time and they had to last her all week, so she had to be very careful which ones she picked. "You're very small."

I have eighty-seven pages.

Which wasn't many, especially as it was handwritten. She could read that in a few hours. "Are there dragons?"

No. The book's sharp irritation was evident even through the thick glass.

Sarah dropped her hands from the case. "I want a book with dragons."

The book fluttered with irritation. *Read me, it repeated sharply. You have to.*

If there was one thing Sarah Dove didn't like, it was being told what to do. With six older sisters, that happened way too often as it was. So instead of agreeing to read the book, she said, "No, thank you," and turned to leave.

A boy she knew from school stood not four feet away, staring at her.

Blake McIntyre was a year older than Sarah. Whenever her sisters were anywhere near his older brother Carter, who was a senior in high school, they became giggly and weird, which annoyed Sarah so much that she took it out on Blake whenever she saw him. It would have been more meaningful to take out her irritation on Carter, but he was never around. Meanwhile, she saw Blake on the bus every day, and so she teased him mercilessly.

He looked past her to the case and then back. "Who are you talking to?" Despite his bold tone, his face burned bright red.

"I'm talking to myself. Who else?"

He shifted from one foot to the other, his book bag hanging heavy on his shoulder. After an awkward moment, he said in a stiff tone, "I never talk to myself."

She shrugged. "That's because you wouldn't listen."

He scowled. "You don't know that."

She offered a scoffing smile, one she'd learned from her oldest sister, Madison, who seemed to instinctually know how to cut a person to the quick. "Don't I?"

His face turned an even brighter red. After an awkward moment he muttered something under his breath, and then, with a final, confused look from her to the case and back, he left.

The book barely waited for him to leave before it hissed, *Open the case. It's not locked.*

"Nope." She scooped up her book bag from where she'd left it on the floor. "I need a book with dragons."

You'll be back! the book whispered angrily. *Wait and see! You need me!*

Sarah ignored it and headed upstairs to the Young Adult section. She was happy when she reached the books she really liked, the ones that didn't snap at her, but instead told stories of dragons and swords and girls who made things happen.

For the next month, every time Sarah returned to the library, the book fussed at her. First it would demand, then it would beg, and when that didn't work, it would snarl and fume. Irrked by the book's insistence, Sarah started using another path to reach the stairs to the Young Adult section, avoiding the display case altogether.

As the weeks passed, Sarah discovered she could hear other books, too, although their voices were silkier and whisper-soft. They weren't demanding like the journal, but instead tried to tempt her.

You'd enjoy reading me, a very pretty book with a red cover told her one Saturday.

She thought about that. "Do you have dragons?" she asked.

No, but there's a unicorn on page 142.

She liked unicorns, but not as much as dragons. Sarah mentioned this to the book, and because it was much politer than the journal, the book sighed its regret. *Another time, then,* it said. *When you're tired of dragons.*

Which would never happen. "Of course," Sarah replied politely as she moved down the shelves.

Later that day, sitting in the back seat of the van with her book bag in her lap, Sarah asked her sister Ava, who was closest to Sarah in age, if books ever talked to her.

Ava snorted rudely. “No, but I wish plants could.” Ava was always growing something. Their backyard was filled with flowers, all because of her. Mom said Ava had a “green thumb,” which was true. Ava’s thumb, like the rest of her hands, had a faint green tint. “It’s grass stain,” Ava had said. “From working in the garden.” But Sarah didn’t believe her. They were Doves, after all.

She looked at Ava now and wondered what it would be like if flowers could talk. After thinking about it (and remembering that some plants had thorns and prickles and could cause itchy rashes), Sarah decided she’d rather have books talk to her than anything else. Well, all books except one.

When they reached home, Sarah—always the last one out of the van—waited for the screen door to bang closed behind her annoying sisters before she hefted her book bag over her shoulder and went around the porch to the backyard. No one would miss her until dinner, and she couldn’t wait to read the books she’d checked out of the library.

As she walked by the rusty swing set, she glanced to the house next door where Travis Parker lived. She and Trav had been in the same class since kindergarten, and he was her best friend. He wasn’t home this summer, as he was staying with his grandpa at his farm outside of Atlanta. She wished Trav was here, because she’d tell him about the talking book and how rude it had been. He’d probably laugh at her, but that was okay. She laughed at him, too, so it all worked out.

She stopped to kick off her shoes, sighing happily as her toes sank into the cool, soft grass. Stuffing her shoes into her backpack, she hurried past Ava’s flowers where they lined the path to the huge, sprawling willow at the very back of the yard.

Hundreds of years old, the tree rose into the sky and then bent over to trail its leafy branches in the shallow creek that wandered

across the back corner of the yard. Sarah loved this tree and she was pretty sure it loved her, too.

With a quick glance at the house to make sure none of her sisters were watching, Sarah slipped behind the tree to her special place. The back of the trunk had been hollowed out by a long-ago lightning strike. Over the years, the wood had been worn smooth by rain and wind until, when she sat against the trunk, it fit her perfectly and hid her from view.

Sarah opened her backpack and reached in for one of her books . . . and then frowned. In her hand was the cranky journal, its cracked leather cover rough under her fingers. "How did you get here?"

Does it matter? I'm here, so read me.

The note of satisfaction in its voice irked Sarah. "No." She put the journal aside and dug into her book bag, searching for the two books she'd checked out, both about dragons and elven warriors. After a moment, she looked at the journal. "Where are they?"

Not here. So read me.

For a wild moment, Sarah thought about throwing the old journal into Sweet Creek. But one look at the cracked-leather cover and yellow-edged pages made her reluctantly abandon the idea. It was an old, old book, over two hundred years old, and was important to the town, which was why it had been locked in the case. *Maybe that is why it's so cranky. It's old and it was locked away. That would make me cranky, too.*

With a deep sigh, she picked up the journal, placed it on her lap, and spread her hand over the leather cover. She'd only meant to feel the cracked leather, but to her astonishment, words and pictures flew through her mind. She saw a graceful but ink-stained hand writing the words in the journal using a quill dipped in ink. She saw sunsets and sunrises and a long, long trip on a creaky wagon. She saw the glimmer of a silver lake in the middle of a green valley, and a tree crashing to the forest floor on its way to becoming the floorboards for a house. She saw a blue-eyed boy with hair the same color

as hers looking back over his shoulder and smiling, and a group of men straining against ropes tied to a wall as it was lifted into place in a building she recognized as the First Baptist Church.

She saw all of this and more at a breathtaking pace, her hand growing warmer as the pictures grew more vivid, more real. Faster and faster they came until, finally, her head aching slightly, she yanked her hand from the cover and stared down at her burning palm.

The book whispered a reluctant apology.

She curled her fingers over her palm and knew the book had been right. "I need to read you."

Yessss.

Sarah settled against the tree, opened the book, and soon became lost in the scribbled words. And as she did so, she saw her town the way Charlotte Dove had seen it in 1702. Sarah saw Dove Pond being born and then growing one building at a time. She saw people who came and stayed. People who fell in love and married, had children, and then grew old and died. She saw each and every moment Dove Pond had existed, even beyond the pages of the book, and as she read the journal, she realized that she lived in a place like no other.

It was there, under the dripping limbs of the weeping willow tree, on the grassy banks of Sweet Creek, and deep within the pages of her ancestor's journal, that Sarah May Dove fell in love with her hometown.

Later, when she was older and had time to think about it, she'd realize that was what the book had wanted all along. But at the time, she was merely lost to the drama, the excitement Charlotte Dove had spilled onto the pages, along with the beauty of the people who'd made Dove Pond live.

Sometime later, the screen door slammed. "Sarahhhhh!" Her sister Madison, who was as bossy as she was long legged and tall, yelled again. "Dinnnnnerrrr!"

Sarah rubbed her eyes. How long had she been reading? It couldn't have been long, because the book only had eighty-seven pages, and yet the sun was much lower than when she'd first sat down.

“Sarrrrrahhhhh!” Madison yelled again, more sharply this time. Sarah’s mom said something from inside the house, and after a pause, Madison disappeared, the screen door slamming closed behind her. She’d be back, though. Madison wasn’t the sort of person who quit.

Sarah closed the book and hugged it against her chest. The words, invisible but vibrant, soaked through the cover. If she closed her eyes, she would see the story once again, as if she were still reading.

A faint breeze arose, rustling the grasses and lifting the scent of the damp evening air, fireflies just beginning to dance across the yard, as if offering to lead her home.

Read the rest, the book demanded.

“I will,” Sarah said. “But after dinner when no one will bother me.” She picked up her book bag, slid the book inside, and then stood, her legs stiff. “I promise.”

She couldn’t stop now, and both she and the book knew it. Later, while everyone slept, she’d crawl deep under the covers with her flashlight and read until the middle of the night, devouring every last word the way a starving person would a meal, savoring each bite even while ripping furiously into the next one.

But for now, she shouldered her book bag and slipped out of her hiding place into the cooling evening. With the book muttering irritably from her bag, she followed the line of fireflies across the yard and went inside.

Grace

WHITLOW, NC
THE SAME DAY

“I’m a good girl. I’m a good girl. I’m a good girl.” Grace Michelle Wheeler whispered the words under her breath from where she sat beside her sister in the back of their caseworker’s car. Grace said the words a lot, hoping against hope they’d come true. But somehow, they never did.

If Grace had been a good girl, her mother wouldn’t have left her and Hannah on the church steps and then run off with Rob, the greasy-haired man from the corner Fast Mart who smelled like old burritos.

If Grace had been a good girl, neither she nor Hannah would be where they were now, sitting in the back of their caseworker’s car, on the way to yet another foster home.

If Grace had been a good girl, they’d never have to worry about food to eat, or a place to live.

Grace met Miss Wanda’s gaze in the rearview mirror. The caseworker’s damp round face puckered with disappointment. “You’re

too old for such behavior. Why, you're going to be in the fifth grade when school starts back."

Grace jutted out her chin. "I'm not sorry."

The caseworker flushed. "You should be! You have to do better. You *have* to."

Grace knew she had to do better. But no matter how good she was, how careful she was, things happened. Things she couldn't control. At the last place, she'd gotten into a fistfight with the Hendersons' redheaded son, Mark. If he'd made fun of her, she'd have ignored him, because she was used to that sort of thing. But this time he'd been mean to Hannah, and Grace had seen red.

Grace saw red a lot. Sometimes the color floated above her, not hot as she'd always thought anger would be, but icy and frozen, a blast of frigid air waiting to drop on her head and freeze her mid-flight. And when it happened, when the red enveloped her and threatened to trap her in place, she fought, swinging hard fists and kicking with all her might. This time, she'd smashed Mark's fat nose until it bled. He'd sobbed like the stuffed marshmallow he was until his parents had come running and pulled her off him.

Through the fading, icy haze, she'd heard Mark denying he'd done anything wrong. Grace had a history of lashing out, so she hadn't offered a word to defend herself, knowing it would be useless. Besides, she couldn't blame the Hendersons for taking their son's word over hers. They were only doing what real parents were supposed to. She hadn't been surprised when they'd called Miss Wanda and demanded that Grace be moved to another home, although they hoped to keep Hannah.

Everyone wanted to keep sweet, blond-haired, blue-eyed Hannah, and no one wanted wild, brown-haired, brown-eyed Grace. When Miss Wanda had explained that Grace and Hannah were sisters and had to be together, the Hendersons had let them both go. And so, here they were. Homeless again.

The miles sped by outside the car window, and Grace pressed her

fist against her aching stomach. She knew what was ahead. There'd be another home with different rules from the last, rules she and Hannah were somehow already supposed to know. And another school with whispering girls and mocking boys who'd notice their choppy haircuts and hand-me-down clothes and regard them as intruders. And teachers who would frown at such late, end-of-the-year transfers and shake their heads when they realized how far behind both girls were. That was the price one paid for moving schools: being either too behind or too ahead. It was always one or the other. And not being accepted was the price one paid for not already belonging. There was no cure for it. It was how it was, and how it would always be.

Suddenly tired, Grace leaned her head against the window and saw that Miss Wanda was looking in the rearview mirror at Hannah. The caseworker's face softened until it reminded Grace of fresh-baked bread.

People always did that when they looked at Hannah. While Grace fought her way through life, her hair tangled and her fists tight, Hannah floated along on a silver cloud, her feet never muddy, her hair as silky smooth as her smile. She never allowed other people and their harsh words to affect her. Grace was proud her little sister was able to keep the muck of their life from splattering onto her smiles.

For Grace, Hannah was everything. And so long as Hannah loved her, Grace would find the strength to deal with the rest of the stuff they had to put up with. They were a family, the two of them, and no one could change that. When Grace grew up, she'd take care of them both. She'd get a job, one with a desk and folders and Post-it notes, and she and Hannah would have enough food and the best clothes and house that money could buy and they'd live together forever.

Miss Wanda turned the rusty Honda into a long, narrow dirt road. The car bumped along the drive, kicking up enough dust to dim the morning sun. When they reached the end of the road and parked, the dust settled around them, coating the car in a reddish haze.

Grace craned her neck to look out the window. A chipped, white-

painted house sat in a yard packed with flowers of every kind and color, captured in place by a crooked white picket fence. Three mutts pressed their noses through the slats, tongues lolling as they panted heavily.

Miss Wanda opened their door and then waddled to the trunk to get their duffel bags while Grace helped Hannah with her seat belt. They climbed out of the car into the moist, humid air.

Grace held Hannah's hand, which was hot and a little sticky from the peppermints Miss Wanda had given them when she'd first picked them up.

"Good lord!" Mrs. Wanda huffed as she hauled their bags from her trunk. "Grace, what's in your bag? It weighs a ton."

Grace didn't answer. Up until a year ago, everything she'd owned hadn't been enough to fill her bag more than a third of the way full. But now it was stuffed with important things she'd started collecting for when she and Hannah had their own home. The things weren't new, but Grace would replace them after she got her first paycheck. Right now, inside the duffel bag were two slightly stained mugs rescued from a trash can at school; two forks and spoons taken from a church dinner when no one was watching; and a dented pot she'd found in the weeds behind a parking lot while waiting for Mrs. Henderson to finish a meeting. There were other things, too—a forgotten beach towel she'd found in a moldy box in the Hendersons' garage, a shiny canister that had once held dog biscuits but had been thrown out when the seal had stretched, and other items, all ready for when she and Hannah were old enough to strike out on their own. Grace wished that time was now.

Face red from exertion, Miss Wanda dropped the duffel bags beside the car and took a deep breath. "There. We're unloaded." She proffered another fake smile. "Smell that fresh air? This is much better than being in the city, isn't it? I think you'll like living with Mrs. Giano."

Grace stared past her to the house, which, despite the cacophony of flowers in the yard, had a tired, baked-in-the-sun air. "That's not a house. It's a shack."

Miss Wanda flushed. “Grace Wheeler, you shut your mouth! Mrs. Giano may not be as well-off as some of the other foster parents, but she has a sufficient income and is very good with the children she takes.” The caseworker hesitated and then added in a defensive tone, “I’ve known Mrs. Giano since I was a little girl. In fact, I’m the one who talked her into being a foster parent. We grew up in the same town, and while she may be a little different, she’s kind and smart and . . .” As Miss Wanda’s voice trailed off, her gaze moved to the house. After a moment, she added in a murmur, as if talking to herself, “She’s special.”

Unimpressed, Grace looked at the yard, where the flowers crowded toward the small house as if trying to climb in. One vine had even managed to find a hold on the peeling paint of a clapboard wall and looked like it was tapping on the window. The dogs panted loudly in the quiet, watching them through the cracks in the faded wood fence, their wagging tails stirring the flowers.

Everything was unfamiliar and awkward and new. Grace was tired of new. She wanted something familiar and comfortable, although right now, she couldn’t think of anything that was either of those. The urge to run shivered through her. “No. We don’t want to stay here.”

“Want? Lord, child, you’ll be lucky if you’re *allowed* to stay. Mrs. Giano’s very picky about who she takes.”

“She gets to pick?”

Miss Wanda cut Grace a hard look. “They *all* get to pick. Mrs. Giano only allows certain children to stay with her, and then not many. In fact, it’s been almost a year since she’s had any.” The caseworker eyed the open window before adding in a low voice, “We’re to go to the porch. Mrs. Giano will come and look at you there.”

Grace’s chest burned. She knew what Mrs. Giano would see, and it wouldn’t be good, at least not for Grace. The red frost hovered overhead. The uncertainty made things worse, freezing her blood while angry, icy strands shot through her body. “I don’t care if she looks at

us.” Grace raised her voice. “*I’m* going to be looking at *her*, too. And I might not like her, so—”

“*Grace!*” the caseworker hissed. “Stop it! If this doesn’t work, then—” Miss Wanda cast a meaningful glance at Hannah.

The world stuttered to a sudden halt, locked in place like a too-sharp picture. Grace, still holding Hannah’s hand, choked out a ragged “No!”

Genuine pity flashed across Miss Wanda’s plump face, the tears in her eyes more frightening than anything she’d said. “I’m sorry, Grace, but that’s the way it is. And it’s your own fault. This is the third placement in less than a year. My supervisor has had it. I had to beg her to let us try this. This is your last chance.”

Hannah looked up at Grace. “What does she mean?”

We’ll be separated. I’ll go to the group home, and you’ll be placed with a family, and we’ll never see each other except for holidays, if even then. And you’ll grow up without me and we’ll no longer feel like sisters, even though we are. That was what Grace should have said. She never lied to Hannah. You didn’t lie to the people you loved. But the horribleness of losing Hannah froze Grace’s tongue and she could no more answer than she could think.

Her terror must have shown, for Hannah’s expression softened into a faraway look as if she had gone to a better place. Humming softly, Hannah began to turn away, her fingers slipping from Grace’s.

Loneliness swamped Grace and she gripped her sister’s hand tighter. “It will be fine,” she said desperately.

Hannah looked back at her, doubt clouding her usually clear blue eyes.

“*I promise, Hannah.*” Whatever happened, she would never part from Hannah. Never. *I’ll be good. I’ll be good. I’ll be good.* A huge pressure settled on her chest, the cold red cloud hanging so low that it fluttered over her, tugging painfully. Ignoring it, she looked Miss Wanda right in the eye. “Hannah and I will *make* Mrs. Giano like us.”

Relief flickered across the caseworker's doughy face. "Good. That's exactly what needs to happen. I'll do what I can, but it's really up to you." Her gaze softened. "This is a wonderful home, although you'll be changing schools again. Still, you can always make new friends, can't you?"

It wasn't a question, so Grace didn't answer. She didn't have friends. She had nothing in common with the girls in her classes. Their worlds consisted of things Grace had never known, things like birthday cakes, homes they were never forced to move from, and parents who loved them. They didn't know or understand her world, what it felt like to go hungry, to be left alone for days at a time only to be placed into a foster system that tossed her about like a ball in a game. And she was fine with that, because she had Hannah, who was both Grace's sister and her best friend. That was all she needed. Just Hannah.

"Let's go, girls!" Miss Wanda smiled her too-sunny smile as she picked up the duffel bags, grimacing once more at the weight. She swung Hannah's lighter bag over her shoulder and lumbered to the gate, the other bag bumping heavily against her shin. She flipped up the latch and opened the gate. "Go on in."

The dogs crowded forward, tails wagging as Grace and Hannah walked past Miss Wanda and into the small yard. The caseworker closed the gate and then led the way up the cracked concrete sidewalk to the porch, chatting breathlessly and exclaiming over Mrs. Giano's excellent cooking and how much they'd like having so many pets.

Hannah released Grace's hand, cooing at the dogs as she bent down to welcome wet kisses. She loved animals. At times, Grace wondered if her sister loved them more than people. Grace wouldn't blame her if she did.

They climbed the stairs to the porch. It was a rickety place, the porch, but someone had tried to make it pretty. The wood-slatted floor had been painted an ocean blue, and two white wicker chairs filled with plump, colorful pillows sat beneath a window. A small

metal table stood between them and held two books, their pages yellowed with age.

While Hannah continued to coo at the dogs, Grace wandered toward the books. She didn't like to read, but as school detention often consisted of writing lines over and over while seated at a cubicle in the school library, she'd seen the title of this one before. It was *James and the Giant Peach*. The second book was fatter, intimidatingly so, the words *Little Women* scrawled over the cover in sweeping gold letters. Grace wondered how little the women were. Were they just short, or were they fairy-size? She hoped they were fairy-size.

Miss Wanda dropped the duffel bags onto the wood porch and fanned her red face with a limp hand. "Good God, Grace, your bag feels like you've got rocks in there. I—" She sniffed the air and instantly brightened. "Bacon! Mrs. Giano must be fixing breakfast."

Grace's stomach growled, but she ignored it and picked up the fat book. She opened it and was surprised to find that it smelled like cake. She wished she could sit in one of these cushioned chairs and read about little, tiny wo—

The screen door banged open and Mrs. Giano stepped outside, a fat orange cat following her.

Mrs. Giano was small and not so young, although her movements were quick like a wren's. She wore a dress printed with so many flowers that if she'd fallen in her own yard, Grace didn't think they would be able to find her.

"Good morning!" Miss Wanda pulled the book from Grace's hand and put it back on the table, then collected Hannah. The caseworker pushed the girls in front of her, her hands as heavy as sandbags on their shoulders. "These are the girls I told you about. Girls, this is Mrs. Giano."

The woman walked toward them, the smell of bacon and pancakes wafting with her. She was short, with black hair so vivid it couldn't be real, and dark, piercing eyes that seemed to see everything at once. Her cat walked with her, ignoring the dogs, that were now falling

over themselves trying not to make eye contact as if the fat house cat was a lion in disguise.

“Good morning.” Mrs. Giano’s voice was as colorful as her clothing, syrup-slow and rich. She stopped in front of them, hands folded, one brow lifted, no smile on her pointed face. “And what are your names?”

“This is Grace. She just turned ten. And this”—Miss Wanda thrust Hannah slightly forward—“is Hannah, who is seven years old.”

Mrs. Giano eyed Hannah for a long moment, and Grace waited for the inevitable gushing.

But instead, Mrs. Giano crossed her arms over her narrow chest and said nothing.

Miss Wanda’s smile faltered, and she said in a hopeful voice, “Hannah is a wonderful child. Everyone says so. She’s never in trouble and has very good manners.”

Mrs. Giano bent to examine Hannah more closely.

Hannah returned the look, her distant smile never changing.

Mrs. Giano straightened. “Lord, but you are trouble, aren’t you?”

Miss Wanda’s eyes widened.

But Hannah’s smile just grew. “What’s your cat’s name?”

“Theo.”

“I want to pat him.” Hannah reached out her hand.

The cat arched, hissing.

Mrs. Giano didn’t look surprised. “Perhaps another time.”

Hannah shrugged and turned her attention back to the dogs.

Miss Wanda blinked rapidly. “Mrs. Giano, Hannah is never trouble. It’s Grace who—” The caseworker caught herself. “But she promises to be good this time. And she will, won’t you, Grace?”

Mrs. Giano’s dark gaze moved to Grace.

Grace lifted her chin and stared back, desperately wanting to say something smart or funny that would make this woman like her enough to let them stay. But the more Grace wanted it, the angrier she became.

She hated this.

Hated the feeling she had to plead for food and a place to live.

That she had to beg to exist.

To even breathe.

The longer she and Mrs. Giano locked gazes, the madder Grace got, and the lower the red frost came.

“Stop glaring!” Miss Wanda hissed, her hand tighter on Grace’s shoulder.

But Grace couldn’t. She was locked in battle, and she wouldn’t—couldn’t give up.

Something silky wrapped around her ankle. Startled, she looked down.

Theo blinked up at her as if he understood how worried and furious she was, and how confusing it was to feel both of those things at the same time.

He butted his head against her ankle and purred loudly.

“Well, well.” Mrs. Giano smiled. “Theo likes you.”

Grace didn’t know what to say. She watched the cat twisting around her leg, and she was afraid to pet it for fear it might hiss the way it had at Hannah.

“Mrs. Giano, please,” Miss Wanda said in a breathless, desperate tone. “Give them a chance. I promise they’re both good girls. Grace just needs a steady home life and she’ll—”

“*Pssht*. I can see the girl myself.” Mrs. Giano’s gaze moved from Grace to the small table where the books rested. “I saw you with the book. So you like to read, do you?”

For a moment, Grace—so desperate for acceptance—thought about lying, but somehow Mrs. Giano’s gaze no longer felt so challenging. “I don’t like to read,” Grace admitted. “I’m not very good at it.”

A sliver of a smile crossed Mrs. Giano’s narrow face. “You’ll get better with practice. I promise.”

I promise, the woman had said. That meant Grace would be around longer than ten minutes. A tiny sprout of hope bloomed in

her heart, but the frosty haze over her head rippled a stern warning. She'd hoped before and it hadn't helped. She knew from experience that hoping was dangerous and painful.

Don't give in, she reminded herself. Her jaw tightened, and she said in a sharp tone, "I might never like to read, even if I do practice."

Miss Wanda puffed out a muted anxious noise.

Mrs. Giano's gaze narrowed and then slowly moved from Grace's face to the red frost that hung over her head. The woman's expression softened and she tsked. "That's not good for such a little one, is it?"

Grace didn't know what to say. No one had ever acknowledged the cold mist that followed her. And certainly no one had looked worried about it. "It won't leave."

Mrs. Giano nodded slowly. "It will take some work, but we will make it go away."

Miss Wanda frowned, obviously confused. "Mrs. Giano, what—" "I'll take them."

Grace's chest eased as air rushed in.

The cat meowed loudly, as if echoing his owner.

Miss Wanda said in a cautious tone, "*Both* of them?"

Mrs. Giano shot the caseworker a hard, impatient glance. "Of course, both." She turned to Grace and Hannah. "Call me Mama G. That's easier than 'Giano.' Now, come in and have breakfast. I made scrambled eggs, bacon, and biscuits. All of us should eat, except"—she pointed a finger at one of the dogs—"you. You stole some of my bacon from the counter, so you will eat last."

The dog, a spotted mongrel with one ragged ear, didn't seem surprised to have been singled out. In fact, Grace thought he looked almost embarrassed. Ears down, tail hesitantly wagging, he went to the end of the porch and lay down in a spot of sun as if resigned to his fate.

Inside, a bell dinged. "Ah. The biscuits are ready."

As soon as Mama Giano mentioned "biscuits," the air was filled anew with the rich scent, as if it had been waiting inside for its cue.

“I’d better get them before they burn. Come on in.” The screen door slammed behind her as she disappeared into the cool darkness of her home.

Theo, his green eyes locked on Grace’s face, wound back and forth around her legs as she stared at the door, her heart aching in a new, unfamiliar way. She wanted so badly to believe everything she’d seen so far. That this place might really be different. That she and Hannah had finally found a place to stay that would last longer than a few months.

Life had taught Grace that that was unlikely, even impossible, but her bones ached with how so, *so* much she wanted it to be true.

Miss Wanda puffed out a heavy sigh of relief. “That went better than I’d hoped, although—” Her gaze flickered to Hannah, and she seemed on the verge of blurting out something. But after a moment’s struggle, she shook her head and forced a bright smile. “I’ll get Hannah’s bag. Grace, you can carry yours.”

Grace left the cat and got her duffel bag, half dragging it beside her, the pot clanging against the cups. She moved slowly, lingering so that she was well behind Miss Wanda and Hannah.

As soon as the screen door closed behind them, Grace dropped the bag and looked around. The cushioned chairs beckoned while the fluttering breeze played with the nodding flowers. The scent of bacon and biscuits made her stomach ache with something other than sadness.

The cat sauntered around the now-dozing dog and came to sit beside Grace. He leaned against her, warm and fluffy, his orange silk fur soft against Grace’s leg. The slow twitch of his tail and the deep purr rumbling from his chest made the moment sweet.

Grace closed her eyes and lifted her face to the spill of sunlight that slanted under the porch roof. “We are going to be okay,” she whispered.

For once, she wasn’t saying it to make herself or Hannah feel better. This time, she meant it.

Calm settled over Grace, unfamiliar and rare, yet as warm and comforting as a towel fresh from the dryer. It wrapped around her, easing her heart and softening her anger.

It would be years before she figured out what the delicious feeling was, but every day after, she would remember it as clearly as if it were still there. For it had been in that moment there, on the porch of Mama G's small, weathered clapboard house as it baked in the morning summer sun, a fat cat leaning against her leg, that Grace discovered what it felt like to come home.

❖ CHAPTER 1 ❖

Grace

DOVE POND, NC
MAY 16, 2019

“Are we there yet?” Daisy asked.

“No,” Grace said for the eighth time, her eyes locked on the moving truck that slowly rumbled along in front of her Honda. Every side of the ancient truck bore the words MCLAREN’S YOU NEED TO MOVE WE CAN DO IT, LLC.

Mama G, in the front beside Grace, looked over the seat at Daisy. “We just passed the ‘Welcome to Dove Pond’ sign, so it won’t be long now.”

“We’ve been driving *forever*.” Daisy slumped, twirling her ponytail with restless fingers, a habit she’d picked up during the past few difficult months.

Daisy was a precocious child, this daughter of Hannah’s and an unknown boy from her high school. Even at the tender age of eight, Daisy was an odd, old-souled sort of kid, all elbows and knees, blurt-ing what she thought no matter how bold or ill-advised. She was smart, too, perhaps even brilliant, according to her test scores, and

she could read well above her level, devouring books the way most kids her age devoured cartoons. Despite that, the child made only mediocre grades, as she was easily distracted, she and her restless mind. *Just like her mother.*

Grace looked at Daisy in the rearview mirror, noting the blond hair and crystal-blue eyes. *Oh, Hannah, you would be so proud of her.* Grace's throat tightened and she forced herself to focus on the truck they followed.

Mama G looked up from her knitting to admire the large maples and elms that dotted the streets. "I love these trees." She sighed happily, then returned her attention to the mittens she was making.

Shortly after Grace and Hannah had come to live with Mama G, she'd taken up knitting, saying it "calmed the nerves." Grace thought that was strange, because no one had a more peaceful spirit than Mama G. Over the years, she'd made hundreds of scarves and mittens, most of which had ended up in Grace's room, as Hannah had never liked them.

Grace glanced over at Mama G now. Her once-graceful hands were liver spotted and gnarled, but they never stopped moving. Normally, Mama G's rhythmic knitting sent a flood of calm through Grace, but today it did nothing.

Right now, everything felt useless, empty. *Broken.*

Grace swallowed the lump in her throat and applied the brakes as the moving truck slowed in front of her. "We should be turning onto Elm Street soon."

As if in answer to her prayers, the truck's signal flashed and the vehicle slowly turned.

"Almost there." Grace admired the rows of elms that shaded the road. "Our new house is at the end of this street." *New* meaning "recently rented." She silently ticked through her Things That Must Be Done list: unpack, register Daisy for school, find a caretaker for Mama G—the list seemed endless, and she winced to think about the shrinking amount left in her bank accounts. The events of the

past few months had murdered her savings. But by Grace's careful calculations, if they lived frugally over the next year, they would have enough for a down payment on a small house in Charlotte.

The thought of returning to Charlotte calmed Grace. For the past five years, she'd worked at a large financial company in one of the city's trendier areas. She'd been happy there and, until the craziness of the past few months, she'd never thought she'd leave.

But she'd go back, and this time she'd take Mama G and Daisy. It wouldn't be easy, but it would happen. She would make sure of it.

Behind her, Daisy leaned against her window and stared at the houses rolling past. The street was long and wide, the sidewalks shaded by the towering trees. The quality of the houses perched along the way gave Grace hope. Huge and ornate, the grand old lady houses flaunted a variety of pastel colors. Windows glinting in the afternoon sunshine, they gazed at one another with sleepy, lace-fluttered windows and wide, white-trimmed porches.

It looks like a safe neighborhood, and these houses—wow! Perhaps this will all work out. Hope blossomed, so Grace—ever cautious—tried to tamp it down, hugging her worries like a shield.

"I like these houses," Daisy said. "I bet they have ghosts. They look like the right kind."

Grace looked at Daisy in the rearview mirror and saw her niece's nose pressed against the window glass. "There is no such thing as ghosts."

Her mouth instantly tight with anger, Daisy said in a sullen tone, "How would you know?"

Grace had to clamp her mouth over a sharp reply. Just a week ago, Mama G had warned Grace to pick her battles with Daisy, and this wasn't a hill worth dying on.

It still hurt, though. And Grace was never sure if she was giving up some sort of authority by not reprimanding Daisy about things like tone of voice and eye rolls. *I don't know a darn thing about raising kids. Not one. Yet now, here I am.*

Until two months ago, Grace's position in Daisy's life had been "Favorite Aunt" and nothing else. Grace had loved being the FA, who breezed into town like Mary Poppins, beloved by everyone as she bestowed presents and took Mama G and Daisy on all sorts of fun adventures. *Those were the days*, she thought wistfully. But things were different now. *Everything has changed.*

Daisy muttered to herself, "I *like* ghosts."

Grace tightened her grip on the steering wheel. It was silly to argue about something as ridiculous as ghosts, but she didn't want Daisy afraid to sleep at night because of every old-house thump and creak. For all of Daisy's bravado, she was a sensitive child and suffered from her own overactive imagination.

"Ghosts can be very nice," Mama G said in a thoughtful tone. "The ones I've met were, anyway."

Daisy leaned toward the front seat as far as her seat belt would let her. "You've met ghosts? Were they—"

"She's joking, of course," Grace interrupted. She wished Mama G wouldn't encourage Daisy's flights of fancy.

"Mama G, tell Aunt Grace you aren't joking," Daisy said in a belligerent tone. "Tell her that you've seen ghosts."

Grace swallowed a sigh. Parenting was damned hard. If you weren't being scoffed at, you were being challenged. But then again, maybe it was only difficult because she sucked at it. Part of the problem was that while she wasn't really Daisy's mother, Grace'd also lost her standing as the Favorite Aunt. Right now, neither she nor Daisy were quite sure what Grace was, except inexperienced.

Loneliness swamped Grace, seeping into her soul like icy water. Growing up, no matter how badly life had treated her and Hannah, they'd had each other. Even when, at seventeen years of age, rebellious Hannah had run away, leaving four-month-old Daisy with Mama G, she'd kept in touch with Grace. Grace had been in college, neck-deep in tests and papers and fighting for her place on the dean's list, but she'd been ridiculously grateful for Hannah's scarce text mes-

sages and rare phone calls, even though 90 percent of them had been requests for money. Still, those tiny contacts had made Grace feel that she and Hannah were still a family. But more than that, they'd allowed Grace to pretend that things were okay. That Hannah was okay, even though she wasn't.

Two months and eleven days ago, Hannah had died, her life burned to a crisp by her own wild spirits. And Grace, still pretending things were "okay," hadn't been ready. There was a hole in her life now, one she didn't know how to fill. Somehow, in losing her sister, she'd also lost all the hopes she'd been clinging to that, with time and love, Hannah would stop wandering the world like a lost soul, chasing dangerous men and even more dangerous thrills. That one day, she'd come home, realize how much she missed Grace and Mama G, and how special Daisy was, and she'd welcome them all back into her life. That they'd finally become the family Grace had always so desperately wanted them to be.

Hannah's death had left Grace aching, angry, and empty. But it was even harder for Daisy. The little girl had loved her beautiful but distant mother with an obstinate, uncritical passion. For weeks after the funeral, she'd refused to go to school, staying in bed unless forced to get up, arguing about everything with everybody. It had taken all of Mama G's considerable influence to convince Daisy to return to her classroom. But once there, the child had been sullen and silent, ignoring her friends and teachers alike. She did no homework and when the time came to take a test, instead of answering the problems, she filled the paper with drawings of furious dragons spewing fire. Had her previous grades not been so high and her teachers so understanding, she might have failed.

The school counselor had warned Grace that the next few months, and perhaps longer, would be difficult and that it would be normal for Daisy to continue to "act out," at least for a while. Despite the warning, Daisy's sudden flares of anger and her stubborn refusal to accept Grace as a parent had made a difficult time even worse.

Still, more than anyone else, Grace understood anger. What was difficult was seeing the sheer pain that lurked behind every sharp word that tumbled from Daisy's mouth and being unable to do anything to help.

Grace gripped the steering wheel harder, torn between a growing anger at Hannah for being so careless with herself, even though it had cost others, and also desperate to tell her how much she'd been loved. *Everyone loved you, Hannah. Everyone except you.*

"Ghosts aren't always bad, you know," Mama G mused aloud as she pulled a length of yarn from her knitting basket.

"Mama G, please. Don't."

Mama G nodded. "I know what you're thinking, but ghosts are nothing like the silliness people put in horror movies. Ghosts aren't scary at all. They're just wisps of lives gone by. Shadows, really."

"What do they look like?" Daisy asked before Grace could change the subject.

Mama G stopped knitting and pursed her lips. "Sometimes they're a faint shape. And sometimes they're just a memory that flickers out of the corner of your eye."

"I'm going to meet one," Daisy announced. "I'm going to find out how she died so I can help her find her murderer."

"Most ghosts weren't murdered," Mama G said calmly, pulling more yarn from her basket. "Most died in their sleep."

Grace knew what would happen now. Daisy, always too excitable, wouldn't be able to sleep and it would be Grace, and not Mama G, who'd have to handle it. "Ghosts don't exist," Grace repeated firmly. *"At all."* She wished the moving truck would find the house. It was barely creeping along, and she had no wish to continue this conversation.

Mama didn't look up from her knitting, but said under her breath, "Well, well. *Someone* is in for a surprise."

"It's not going to be me," Grace said baldly. "Mama G, the likelihood of— Ah! Here we are!" *Thank God.* She slapped a smile on her

face and was about to say something ridiculous like *Welcome home!* when the house came into view.

Grace's hopes were instantly and viciously smashed.

Although as beautiful and gracious in design as its neighbors, the house at the end of the driveway was a faded shadow of the others. The pale lavender paint was now more gray than purple, the wide porch was crooked, and much of the delightful trim she'd seen on the other houses was missing, the paint chipped and peeling. Grace was reminded of a jaded old woman wearing a faded housecoat, her worn smile marred by missing teeth.

"I bet this house has ghosts," Daisy said.

"Oh, I'm sure there's more than one," Mama G agreed as she stored her knitting in her bag.

Dear God, please keep me from screaming. Grace drove past the moving truck, which had pulled close to the walk, and parked her car beside a large, rusty RV that sat at the rear of the driveway near a garage with a deeply dented door. She put the car in park and stared up at the house, noting the thick moss that clung to the roof.

Mama G patted Grace's hand where it rested on the steering wheel. "The car's still running."

"I know." She wondered what would happen if they just stayed where they were, locked safely away. The car wasn't large, but it was big enough to sleep in if they lowered the seats and had pillows and blankets and—

"Look!" Daisy opened her door. "There's a tire swing in the tree in the front yard."

Mama G nodded. "I saw that. You'll have to give it a try and see how high you can swing."

"Daisy, wait." Grace leaned forward and tried to see the swing. "Don't get on it yet. I want to be sure it's safe before you—"

It was too late. Daisy had already jumped out and was headed for the swing.

“I’ll get her.” Mama G climbed out of the car and started to follow Daisy but then stopped. She leaned down to look at Grace, where she sat glued in the driver’s seat. “Come inside. It may need a little work, but it’s a lovely house.”

“It’s a wreck,” Grace said flatly.

Mama G smiled, although it was a tired, worn effort. “Grace, I know this is difficult for you—”

“For all of us.”

Mama G’s gaze softened. “Right now, life isn’t fair for any of us. We’re all three mad at life, at all of this change—maybe even at Hannah.”

Grace’s throat tightened.

Mama G sat back in the passenger seat and placed her hand over Grace’s. “You have to let it go. All of it—your anger, your worries, your fears. Daisy is counting on you. And, as much as I hate to add to your problems, so am I.”

Grace grasped Mama G’s hand and squeezed it. “I owe you a thousand years of being counted on.”

Mama G smiled sadly. “Unfortunately, I think you’re about to pay them all back at once. But we have to move forward, sweetheart. And we can’t do that if we hold on to what was.”

“I’m not holding on to anything.”

“Not on purpose, perhaps. But you are in other ways. And so am I, and so is Daisy. It’s tough letting go of something you only thought you had, and that’s what Hannah was—she was a maybe. A possibly. A perhaps. She knew how to make people hope that she was more than she was ever willing to be.”

Grace didn’t think she’d ever heard a better description of Hannah. Still, it was who Hannah was, who she’d always been. Tears burned Grace’s eyes. “She never came to visit and rarely called, but I miss her. It’s so weird. It’s—” She swiped the tears from her eyes.

“I know.” Mama G squeezed Grace’s hand. “Everything is going to be all right.”

“I wish I believed that.”

Mama G chuckled. “Always the skeptic, aren’t you? Even when you were a child. But look. We came to Dove Pond for a new start. If we decide to, we’ll find happiness here. I know we will. This town is . . . well, it’s different. And this is where we’re supposed to be. I’m sure of it.”

Her throat too tight to answer, Grace managed a short nod, although she wished she felt sure about something—anything, really.

Mama G sighed and pulled her hand from Grace’s. “Come in when you’re ready.” She slid back out of the car and started to straighten, but then hesitated.

Grace’s heart sank anew at the flicker of uncertainty in Mama G’s usually serene face. It took all her strength not to let her voice break as she said softly, “You were going to see to Daisy. She went to the swing.”

Mama G’s face cleared. “Oh yes. Daisy.” She nodded as if that was all she needed to hear, but her face was pink with embarrassment. With a few mumbled words, she walked away, the car door hanging open in her wake.

Grace bent over the steering wheel and rubbed her aching temples. Mama G’s memory was getting worse. A month ago, Grace had found her standing in the middle of the road in front of her own home, the mail clutched forgotten in her hands as she looked around, confused and unaware that she was less than forty feet from her own front door.

Warm, humid summer air swirled inside from the open door. Grace closed her eyes, remembering the neat, wonderful life she’d led only a few short months ago when she’d stupidly thought she had figured out life, success, happiness—everything. But all that had changed with one phone call from a weeping Mama G, whose every other word had been “Hannah.”

Grace had gone back to Mama G’s house and together they’d organized the funeral and tried to untangle the mess that had been

Hannah's life. While there, Grace had slowly realized that Mama G wasn't herself. She kept forgetting things, items had been left in odd places, and doctor's appointments were made and missed. After finding Mama G looking so confused in front of her own house, Grace had taken her to the doctor, who'd confirmed that the always-strong, never-wavering Mama G was showing signs of Alzheimer's.

Grace's heart, already broken by Hannah's death, had shattered. Mama G was the rock Grace had built her life upon. And now, quite suddenly, it was Grace's turn to make things work and to take care of not just Mama G, but the recalcitrant Daisy as well. Grace only hoped she was strong enough to do both.

At first, she'd hoped she could pack them up and take them to Charlotte with her, but it had taken no more than ten minutes of honest face-the-music thought for her to realize that she couldn't continue to work eighty hours a week as a financial analyst, raise a devastated and angry Daisy, *and* take care of Mama G, all at one and the same time. No matter how many times Grace ran the numbers, the reality was grim but clear.

So, broken but unbowed, Grace had quit her dream job, cashed in her retirement plan, paid off her lease, and moved back home to look after what was left of her small, tattered family.

She needed a new job, of course, something with far more flexibility than her previous position. While she'd been searching, one of Mama G's cousins, a sharp-tongued woman by the name of Mrs. Philomedra Phelps, had called Grace and offered her the job of Town Clerk Level 1 for Dove Pond, North Carolina, Mama G's old hometown. The position was well below Grace's skill level, but offered the flexible hours she desperately needed. Attached to the offer was the rental of Mrs. Phelps's own home at a ridiculously low amount, as she was retiring to Florida.

Grace hadn't wanted to move, for the salary was dismal. But two days after Mrs. Phelps's phone call, a big storm had blown through Whitlow and Mama G's ancient house had sprung what seemed like a hundred leaks. Almost every pot in the house had been called into

service to catch the water as it dripped through the eaves and dissolved the ceiling plaster, raining wet, soggy clumps onto Mama G's furniture and rugs. When the repairman came to assess the damage, the burly man had reluctantly informed Grace that the old, rickety clapboard house was past fixing.

The day after this bleak news, the dementia specialist overseeing Mama G's care made a chance comment that brought Grace back to Mrs. Phelps's offer. While discussing treatment options, the specialist mentioned how she'd taken her own mother back to her hometown after she'd been similarly diagnosed and that it had seemed to ease the decline, at least a little.

The doctor hadn't offered the comment as a cure, and indeed, she hadn't mentioned it more than once, but the words had caught Grace's attention. After a long and sleepless night, Grace had called Mrs. Phelps and accepted the job.

And now, here they were, moving from Mama G's worn-out house and into another ramshackle eyesore in the picturesque town of Dove Pond.

Grace wished for the thousandth time that this was all a dream and she'd wake up to everything the way it had been, that Hannah was alive and Daisy not so angry, Mama G's memory not chipping away like old paint, and—

Someone knocked on the window. Two men peered at her through the glass. The big man in gray overalls was mover Ricky Bob McLaren, his brown hair slicked to one side as if his comb only worked in one direction. She knew who he was because of the large patch on his shirt. At his side was his helper, a short, round, bearded man with the name TOMMY emblazoned on his much smaller patch.

Ricky Bob pointed to the truck, then to the house, and then back to the truck.

Tommy, as if helping his boss, mimicked the movements, but in an exaggerated fashion.

Grace rolled down the window. "Yes?"

Ricky Bob held out his hand. "We'll need the house keys."

"Mrs. Phelps should still be home." Grace turned off the car and climbed out. "I'll find her. She—"

"There you are," spoke a brisk, sharp voice, followed by a clanking noise that gave Grace visions of Scrooge's Marley. From around the moving truck, a squat, iron-haired woman in a flowered shirt and khaki shorts appeared. She leaned heavily to one side, carrying a tote filled with bottles of margarita mix and tequila, which clanged with each step. The old woman scowled at Grace. "You said you'd be here by three."

"I said we'd be here *around* three," Grace corrected, adding a smile to soften her words. "It's barely three thirty."

"Which is thirty minutes late. I have hours to drive and a schedule to keep." The woman walked past Grace, the bag of bottles hanging dangerously close to the cracked driveway.

Ricky Bob and Tommy scrambled to get out of her way, scattering like chickens seeing a fox.

Grace swallowed a sharp retort. "The moving men need the house keys."

Mrs. Phelps rolled her eyes. "The doors are unlocked."

"Thank you," the men mumbled as they hurried off.

Grace watched as they made their way into the house, glad to see Mama G and Daisy leave the swing and follow them inside. Grace felt safer knowing they were indoors.

Mrs. Phelps clanked her way toward the ancient RV. "I never lock the doors and Ricky Bob knows that, but then he's an idiot." She set the tote on the ground beside the passenger door of the rusty vehicle. "He was a sight smarter when he was fifteen, if you can believe it. But not now. Too much football. That boy's had more concussions than most people have had colds."

"I was told he was a good mover."

"Better than most, providing you keep the instructions simple." Mrs. Phelps looked Grace up and down. "My, look at you. Where are you going that you're so dressed up?"

Grace looked down at her sundress and sandals, both of which were better suited for a day out in Charlotte's tony Myers Park district than here in tiny Dove Pond. "It's part of my strategy to win the world. You know—dress for the life you want, not the life you have."

"If you dress like that in town hall, you'll be the only one seeing it. The mayor only comes in for a few hours a day, if that. So, other than tax season, you'll be pretty much alone." Mrs. Phelps opened the passenger door, placed her tote on the floorboard, then slammed the door closed. "That's it, then. I'd better get on the road. I scheduled a pee break at seven o'clock, as I should be near Atlanta by then, and you don't want to get caught in traffic and need to pee."

Grace managed to keep her smile, but barely. "You're very organized. That bodes well for my taking on your old job. I'd like to talk about that, as the job description was vague. To be honest, I'm not exactly sure what the town clerk does."

"Every damn thing," Mrs. Phelps said baldly. She walked around the front of the RV to the driver's door, Grace following. "You'll process business licenses, voter registrations, and tax and fee payments. You'll figure it out."

"I'll call if I have questions. But before you leave, about the house. It's . . . um. Not good. It's in worse shape than I expected."

Mrs. Phelps opened the driver's door, which creaked as it swung. "She's solid. Everything works. As we discussed on the phone, I left some of the larger pieces of furniture for you. The rest is stored in the garage, so if you decide you want to use it, just help yourself. You're welcome to it."

"Thank you. I'm worried about the porch, though. It looks crooked."

Mrs. Phelps fixed her icy button-bright gaze on Grace and lifted her thick eyebrows. "That porch has been crooked as long as I've been breathing, and it hasn't fallen off the house yet. So long as you don't load it up with a hundred or more fat people, it should stand for another hundred and fifty years." Mrs. Phelps regarded Grace

with suspicion. “You don’t plan on doing that, do you? Load it up with fat people? When we spoke on the phone, you said you weren’t a partier.”

“I’m not, and I don’t plan on loading the porch with anyone. I—” Grace bit off the rest of her sentence and took a steadying breath. “I would like to have someone check it out.”

Mrs. Phelps looked as if she wanted to argue, but a quick glance at her wristwatch made her snap out a reluctant, “Fine! There’s a business card for the Callahan brothers in the kitchen drawer by the stove. They own a handyman business and can fix just about anything. Call them and have them look at it. If they think something needs doing, they’ll know who to bill.”

“Great. Thank you.”

Mrs. Phelps opened the driver’s-side door, revealing a large, cracked-leather captain’s chair. She hauled herself inside, plopped into the seat, and slammed the door before saying out the open window, “As I told you on the phone, everything is included in the rent but yard care. Better watch that. If you don’t keep it up, you’ll have one of the Dove sisters on your ass about it, and you don’t want that.”

“The Dove sisters?”

“They live there.” Mrs. Phelps nodded up the street.

Grace turned to look. Two houses from them sat what must have been the largest house in Dove Pond. Painted a bold mauve and decorated with more than a usual amount of ornate white trim, it towered over its not-so-small neighbors. But it was the yard that stole all the glory. The grass was a deep, velvety green like that of a golf course, but it was a mere background for the hundreds—no, *thousands*—of flowers that bloomed in meticulously kept beds around the house, down the walkway, around each tree, and along the street. “That belongs on a movie set,” Grace murmured.

“They keep the place up,” Mrs. Phelps admitted in a grudging tone. “Unfortunately, they’re busybodies and will notice if you don’t mow.”

Grace imagined white-haired crones with hooked noses yelling about the height of the grass and demanding that people pick up after their pets. *Great*. “I can’t abide rudeness.”

“They aren’t rude. More likely to kill you with kindness, which annoys the crap out of me even more than rudeness. And they’re always watching.” Mrs. Phelps eyed the mauve house with obvious distaste. “I don’t see ‘em now. Probably at work. The oldest is never home, as she has her own business. But the youngest, Sarah, is the town librarian, and she’s always at the fence between her house and the one next door talking to Travis Parker. He lives there.” Mrs. Phelps nodded at the smaller, neat-looking yellow house that served as a buffer between her house and the Doves’.

“I hope he’s a good neighbor.”

“Not bad,” Mrs. Phelps said, although she didn’t seem happy about it. “Although I can’t stand his damn motorcycle, which he drives like a bat out of hell. He has long hair and tattoos up both arms, but he’s a veteran, so I guess that’s okay. The house used to be his father’s, who died a year or so ago. Trav mostly keeps to himself, which is good.”

Well, that didn’t sound too bad. Except for the motorcycle. She hoped it wasn’t too noisy.

“Damn it, look at the time! I’ve got to go.” Mrs. Phelps started the RV, which belched a puff of black smoke before settling into a rumbling hum. “Call if you have more questions. You have my number.”

“I will. Did you say goodbye to Mama G? She was in the front yard when you came out.”

Mrs. Phelps’s face softened. “We spoke. She seemed fine at first, talking about the house and the memories she had of it, but then I asked why you all had moved here, and she couldn’t remember. Like it had just slipped out of her mind, a big thing like that.”

“It’s been happening more often.”

“Inna was always the smartest one in the room, too. It’s hard to see her like that. She could make me laugh, even when I felt like the world was about to end.” Mrs. Phelps’s blue eyes grew shiny and she

fished in her pocket for a wadded tissue. "It's not so obvious when you talk to her on the phone, but in person . . . Damn." She wiped her eyes and blew her nose before saying in a husky voice, "Take care of her, will you?"

"I will. I need to find someone to watch after her when I'm at work."

"Linda Robinson." Mrs. Phelps tossed the tissue into the empty ashtray. "She's good. Her husband, Mark, works at the post office, so just go in and ask. He'll put you in touch with her."

Grace nodded. She tried to think of something else to ask Mrs. Phelps, but nothing came.

This was it, then. And yet Grace hated to let the old woman leave. As prickly as she was, once Mrs. Phelps left, the move to Dove Pond would be official.

Finite.

Permanent.

No, not permanent, Grace told herself briskly. I have a plan, and if everything goes right, then in a year we'll move to Charlotte and start fresh.

She took a deep breath. It felt good to have a goal for the future firmly in mind. It allowed her to look past the dreary, harsh realities of her present-day situation, and focus on a brighter and better future. Still, her feet didn't move away from the RV. "Good luck in Florida."

"Thanks." Mrs. Phelps looked down the tree-lined street. "I'm going to miss this place. I'd stay here, but my kids moved away, so . . ." She straightened her shoulders as if pushing off pounds of regrets. "Can't spoil my grandbabies unless I'm there. My daughter's mother-in-law has already moved there, and she's had free rein for far too long."

"Ah. You're going to stop her."

"Stop her? Hell no! I'm going to join her. Two grandmothers are better than one. Evelyn is a hoot, too. We plan on joining a line-dance

class together, maybe even try belly dancing.” Mrs. Phelps chuckled. “My daughter won’t know what’s hit her.”

“I’m sure she’ll be glad you’re there.”

“She’d better be. This move is costing me plenty.” Mrs. Phelps revved her engine and removed her arm from the window. “Enjoy Dove Pond!”

Grace stepped back. “We will. We’ll take care of—”

But she was speaking to the side of the RV, as Mrs. Phelps was already moving. The old woman maneuvered the creaky vehicle past Grace’s Honda, around the moving truck, and then—with a speed that belied its massive size—whisked the lumbering vehicle down the drive.

Grace had never been more jealous of a rusty old RV in her life. What she would have given to speed away from this derelict house and the dismal year that lay ahead. *If it weren’t for Daisy and Mama G, I’d pay someone to take my place. Or I would if I could afford it.*

But she couldn’t, which was why they were here now, she and Mama G and Daisy, all three of them washed up onshore, shipwrecked victims in Hannah’s destructive wake. *Oh, Hannah, why did you—*

“Grace?” Mama G appeared from around the moving truck, her brow furrowed with worry. “The movers are asking where to put things and I don’t know what to tell them.”

Grace took a deep breath and forced a smile. “Let’s go see what they need.” She slipped an arm around Mama G’s thin shoulders and they walked back to the house.

Once inside, she settled Mama G and her knitting onto a lumpy, peach-colored divan that had been left in the front sitting room and then went to speak to the movers.

As Grace walked through the rooms, she took stock of their new home. The inside of the house matched the outside—both were lopsided and faded, with hints of long-ago grandeur. The floor was made of wide pine planks that had been scuffed by the rubber and leather

soles of a thousand feet. At one time, the plastered walls must have been a golden color, but over the years, in places where the sun hit, pale yellow patches had bloomed. The light fixtures were wrought-iron relics of a time gone by, and in need of a thorough cleaning. A wide staircase with a decorative handrail arose from the foyer to the second floor, and Grace could hear Daisy's quick footfalls overhead as she went from room to room. Here and there were the large, surprisingly ornate pieces of furniture Mrs. Phelps had left in the house—the long, peach-colored divan Mama G was now perched upon, a pair of green-velvet-covered chairs that looked as if they belonged on a movie set, and a cupboard that filled one corner of the sitting room all the way to the ten-foot ceiling.

Grace joined the moving men where they stood beside the cocoon of tape and blankets that protected her dining room table.

"It won't fit," Ricky Bob announced. "At least not with that in here." He nodded to a huge walnut buffet Mrs. Phelps had left behind. The monstrosity lined one wall and looked more appropriate for a castle.

"We can put the table against the far wall." Tommy scratched his jaw. "But it'll be tight, so your funk shoe might be off-kilter."

Ricky Bob snorted. "Tommy, I done told you about a million times it's 'fang sway,' not 'funk shoe.'" He stripped off the tape that held the blankets in place over the table's delicate surface and then he and his assistant folded the cotton covers and placed them in a neat pile. "I suppose we could move this buffet to another room, if you want."

Grace picked up the blankets. "It's huge, so I doubt it'll fit anywhere else. Just leave it there. The table will be fine against the wall."

"Interested in selling those blankets? I can pay you five dollars each and help you make back the money they cost you."

Grace's arms tightened around the covers. "No, thank you. I'll need them when I move again. We're only staying a year."

Ricky Bob looked surprised at this, but soon he and Tommy headed back out to the truck while Grace stashed the blankets inside

the built-in corner cupboard in the living room. When she finished, she returned to where her table sat, the late-afternoon sun slanting over the gleaming mahogany. She trailed her fingers over the satiny surface, glad to see that it had survived the move unscathed.

The dining room set had been her first purchase after she'd gotten her dream job. It meant a lot to her, although Ricky Bob was right—it was too big for this room. She placed her hand flat on the glossy waxed surface, the wood warm against her fingers. If she were smart, she'd sell this table and get something smaller. But she couldn't give it up. She'd given up so much already. Too much.

A flash of red appeared at the corners of her eyes, and she gritted her teeth against it. It had been years since she'd had to fight her demons. Mama G's love and calmness, along with the steady drumbeat of success, had done much to banish the red-hot anger that used to consume Grace. But Hannah's death had brought a hint of Grace's fury back, and she hated it.

Daisy ran down the stairs, her tennis shoes bouncing off each step. Grace left the table and went into the sitting room, happy to find her niece twirling at the bottom of the steps, her mood lighter than before.

From the divan, Mama G tapped her foot as if she could hear the invisible music. "Lord, child, you do like to dance."

Encouraged, Daisy danced faster, looking just like her mother, blond and serene. But where Hannah could look right through you until you felt lonely and cold, Daisy's gaze was personal and direct, even when she was mad at the world.

Panting from her exertions, Daisy plopped onto the floor beside Mama G. The little girl leaned her head back and, still breathing hard, reached up to touch the sunbeam that poured through one of the front windows, as if trying to catch the golden dust motes that spun in the light.

Grace smiled, caught in the unexpected peacefulness of the moment. Daisy was a warrior, this child of misfortune whose father

had denied her and whose mother hadn't been able to do more than hug her and leave, over and over again until they'd all been exhausted. But that had been Hannah—she'd disengaged from her pain until there'd been nothing left of her to give to her own child. *Or anyone else.*

Ricky Bob and Tommy thumped back and forth through the house, arguing with one another the entire time. They carried in side tables, an armoire, boxes of Daisy's books, and finally a plump blue recliner that clashed horribly with the vibrant green chairs Mrs. Phelps had left behind. "Please put it here." Grace pointed to an empty spot beside the fireplace. As soon as the recliner was in place, Grace patted the armrest. "Look, Mama G. Your favorite chair."

Mama G didn't need two invitations. "That divan is as lumpy as a stack of firewood." She settled into the chair with a sigh of relief, her eyes twinkling as she smiled up at Grace. "You'd think with all the padding on my ass, I wouldn't need such stuffed cushions, but Lord, this feels good."

Daisy, who'd brought Mama G's knitting basket, giggled.

Even Grace had to laugh. "We all deserve comfortable chairs."

Mama G smiled indulgently. But as Grace watched, the older woman's smile slipped, and she looked around the room as if searching for a memory that had just skittered out of sight. "We are . . ." Her voice, which used to be so crisp and firm, started to quaver, much like her hands. "I used to know this place."

Grace patted Mama G's shoulder. "We're in Dove Pond at Philomeda Phelps's house. She just left. Remember?"

Mama G blinked. "Oh. Oh yes." She surveyed the room as if seeing it for the first time. "I hope she'll cook us some spaghetti. I never could make sauce the way she did, although mine's pretty good."

"Your sauce is better than good," Daisy said. "It's perfect."

The loud rumble of a motorcycle outside caught Grace's attention. She left Mama G and Daisy talking about the merits of spaghetti sauce and went to the front window.

Grace pushed aside the lace curtain. Sunlight lit the front yard, gleaming through the trees to sprawl in golden patches on the green grass. The rumble drew closer, and a red-and-silver streak flashed down the street. The bike slowed and then turned into the driveway next door. *This must be Travis Parker.*

Grace leaned forward so she could see him a little better. Broad-shouldered and as powerfully built as a cage fighter, the man wore a white T-shirt and jeans with effortless ease. He parked the bike next to his walkway, kicked the stand into place, and climbed off. He removed his helmet and long, dark hair spilled almost to his shoulders, in odd contrast to the harsh lines of his face. *Oh great, of all the neighbors in the world, I get Khal Drogo.*

He pulled his hand impatiently through his hair, hung his helmet on his bike, and then walked toward his house. He paused as he neared the door and turned to stare across his yard, as if looking for something. The sunlight hit his face and she caught sight of a thick red scar that ran up his neck to disappear under his five-o'clock shadow on one cheek.

I wonder what happened? A motorcycle wreck, no doubt.

He cupped his hands to his mouth. "Killer!" he yelled.

Killer? Alarmed, Grace looked in the direction he stared, waiting to see the hellhound worthy of such a name.

The man called again, more loudly this time. But nothing happened, and after a moment, he shrugged and went inside.

So that was her neighbor. And Killer, too. *If that dog comes even close to Daisy, we're going to have some words.* Mrs. Phelps had said Travis Parker was the keep-to-himself type, and Grace could only hope the old woman was right. Judging from the deeply carved lines on his face, the khal didn't look as if he was what one might call "good-natured."

She was starting to turn away from the window when a blue pickup truck pulled into the drive that curled up to the Dove house. Intrigued, Grace pushed the curtain farther back and was surprised

to see that the woman who climbed out of the truck wasn't an ancient crone at all, but was Grace's age or perhaps even younger. The woman had dark blond hair that was tied in a messy braid that flopped over her shoulder, and she wore a floaty, gauzy dress and sandals.

She reached into the back seat, pulled out a stack of books, and used her shoulder to shut the truck door. She'd just started up the walk toward her house when she stopped and looked down at the books and began scolding them as if they were alive.

Grace blinked. *Good God. I'm surrounded by loonies. Biker Khal Drogo next door and hippie Hermione Granger in the house after that.*

The woman patted the top book on the stack and started up the flower-lined walkway to her door. She'd just reached the steps when, with a sudden swivel, she looked directly at Grace. A delighted smile broke over her face, and she waved.

Startled, Grace jumped back and released the curtain, her face hot. As she turned, she found Mama G's gaze locked on her.

"See something interesting?"

"No," Grace lied.

"You should go and say hi." When Grace shook her head, Mama G tsked. "Change never hurt nobody, child. You know that. It's those who can't or won't change who lose."

"I'm hungry." Daisy put down the ball of yarn she'd been winding for Mama G and stood. "I know what I want for dinner."

Relieved by the distraction and hoping to extend Daisy's rare good mood, Grace said, "Let me guess."

Daisy smiled, for the moment looking so much like her old self that Grace's heart lifted. "Okay," Daisy said. "Guess."

"Spinach?"

"No!" Daisy shook her head and then spun in a circle while Mama G's knitting needles settled into their familiar clicking. "Guess again."

Grace pretended to think, relishing this moment of the not-angry Daisy. "Boiled eggs?"

"No, no, no!" Daisy spun a little faster. "Guess *again!*"

“Liver and onions?”

“No, no, no, *no!*” Daisy tilted to one side, too dizzy to stand as she plopped at Mama G’s feet, panting heavily. “Pizzzzzaaaaaa!”

Mama G looked up from her knitting. “Pizza?”

“You like pizza,” Daisy assured her.

Mama G’s smile disappeared, and she said sharply, “I know I like pizza. My momma used to make the best pies. In fact . . .” Mama G looked around the room. “She and my aunt Penelope would make pies in this very house every Sunday night. Philomedra and I would set the table and we’d have the neighbors over and there’d be wine and— Oh, it was so much fun!”

Grace’s heart lifted. Perhaps coming back to Mama G’s hometown would do her some good, after all. Here, far away from the tatters of their old life, maybe they could find a new one, a better one, one where the world wasn’t ripped in half by the black hole where Hannah used to be.

“Pizza, huh?” Grace threw up her hands as if conceding a victory to the others. “Fine. Pizza it is.” With a smile, she went to quiz the movers on the best place to order a delivery. After all the troubles she, Mama G, and Daisy had weathered, they deserved the best pizza Dove Pond had to offer.

It wasn’t much, but it was a start.