

A person's hands are shown holding a bouquet of lavender flowers. The background is a vast field of lavender in bloom, creating a soft, purple-hued landscape. The lighting is warm, suggesting late afternoon or early morning. The person holding the flowers is wearing a white garment, visible on the right side of the frame.

# fly away home

*A Pigeon Grove novella by*  
**DAVE CENKER**

# Fly Away Home

A Pigeon Grove Novel, Volume 0

Dave Cenker

Published by Dave Cenker, 2019.

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

FLY AWAY HOME

**First edition. July 17, 2019.**

Copyright © 2019 Dave Cenker.

Written by Dave Cenker.

# Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[5](#)

[6](#)

[7](#)

[8](#)

[9](#)

[10](#)

[11](#)

[12](#)

[13](#)

[14](#)

[15](#)

[16](#)

[17](#)

[18](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Author's Reflection](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Dave Cenker](#)

For all those wanderers in pursuit of their dream. Keep going.

**Two roads diverged in a wood and I - I took the one less traveled by,  
and that has made all the difference.**

**~ Robert Frost ~**



# 1

I swirl the glass of white wine and watch tiny bits of cork travel in circles on the surface. It requires too much effort to dig out those fragmented pieces. It's the lie I tell myself, even if my damaged heart welcomes the unorthodox companionship.

A person shouldn't feel such anxiety when visiting her childhood home. I suppose I'm not like most thirty-eight-year-old women. I am alone. Raised by a single mother and born out of wedlock, I know nothing about my father. Fierce resistance met any inquiry into his whereabouts.

The physical bruises disappeared with time. It's the deeper emotional scars that remain a mainstay in my life. Doctors insist the cause of my mother's death was a heart attack. I suspect excessive alcohol consumption played a significant role in her demise. The liquor cabinet disguised as a side table was like Pandora's box. Whenever I heard the latch close on that cupboard door, it triggered an impulsive response. I prepared for what would soon follow. Sometimes it was courtesy of a leather belt. If I was unlucky, it came from the backside of a right hand that should have stroked my cheek, not slapped it.

*I'm sorry for your loss, Claire. Time will heal you.* That's the recurring message I heard from neighbors and guests after the funeral service. I wasn't the least bit sorry, nor was time healing a single thing. I put on a plausible facade, but resentment overpowered my pretense of grieving. Ignoring the coldhearted thoughts seething inside me was impossible, but I need not pretend any longer.

It's now only me, a glass of wine, and a houseful of belongings to empty. If only I could dispose of these painful and repressed memories with the same ease.



## 2

Why is it so hot in here? I suspect stress plays a role, alongside effects from the alcohol I shouldn't be drinking. I'm hypocritical for partaking in libations at this moment, but I have no one here to chastise me.

As I stare at the ceiling, silence surrounds me. I push aside the despondent memories of voiceless pleas from years ago. Instead, I focus on a problem that's fixable: a lack of airflow coming from the vent above me.

The overhead attic door in the hallway is easier to reach as a grown woman. My bedroom chair isn't necessary. I am at ease climbing the stairs. Out of habit I conceal the creaks with each footstep. This was my shelter, a hiding place my mother never discovered because I used it with such discreet care. My destination today is the fuse box, to resolve one problem and hide from many others.

The red flashlight rests in the same spot. Turning it on, I watch a familiar stream of amber light spill from it. After I allow the dust particles floating before me to settle, my emotions do the same. I navigate the maze of boxes and furniture pieces with surprising ease. Swinging open the metal door, I trace my finger along the column of switches, each flipped to the left, save for one. Kicking the offending switch back in line with the others, I hear the air handler come to life outside.

There is so much awaiting me downstairs, packing up the remnants of a life I'd rather forget. But a growing curiosity beckons me. I'm sure it's no longer there, but I still need to check. I round the pile of cardboard boxes stacked three high, once an indestructible fortress to my younger self. I scoff at the naïveté of youth. Now they're nothing more than tattered containers. They hold useless relics from a mother who never loved me.

I catch sight of what I hoped to find. All the negativity inside me melts away, replaced by a warm smile I can't suppress. I run my hand over the shoebox that used to hold my favorite Converse shoes. Opening the lid, I see familiar slips of different colored paper. On autopilot, I walk to the only window and place a sequence of Post-it notes in the frame, for old time's sake. It was a secret language, spoken in hues, not words. Each pattern held a unique message. Only one other individual understood that code, the boy in the house across the yard.





OVER TIME, DILLON HAD become my best friend. Our relationship was born out of necessity and convenience. I needed someone to lean on when consumed by feelings of fear and rejection. He was the closest person willing to meet my needs. In return, he benefited from my ability to understand classic literature.

Dillon had three older sisters, so he possessed a natural comfort around girls. As for me? I escaped to one of two places when I had the opportunity—my attic or the library. There were always plenty of books in both locations. As a voracious reader, I consumed the titles on our school's assigned reading list before anyone else. So ours was a symbiotic relationship. We both had something valuable to offer the other and were both eager to share it.

Near the end of each summer, we'd find ourselves seated in the back corner of Peppi's with a pepperoni pizza between us. We discussed the merits of Steinbeck, Austen, Twain, and Fitzgerald. In the beginning, it was a chore for Dillon to complete the assignments. By senior year, though, he was a much stronger student, and our time together had developed into something more. I remember it with such clarity. And poignancy.

"Come over here. Look at this." I slid over and motioned for him to sit beside me in the booth.

Pushing our greasy pizza plates to the side, he sidled up next to me as I creased the book's spine. I began reciting Robert Frost's poem: "'Two roads diverged in a yellow wood . . .'"

After each line, I glanced up at him, deepening emotion etched into his facial features. Something was different. We had started communicating through unspoken words nestled between each breath. We were writing a story together, filled with excitement, uncertainty, joy, and travel. On roads forsaken by others in my life.

"I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference." I finished the poem, swallowed the lump in my throat, and prepared to share my interpretation of the work.

"You can see . . ." I began my sentence, not wanting to look up and meet his gaze. An unknown fear and anxiety consumed me. When my eyes finally found Dillon's, it took only a moment for his to lock with mine. He connected with something elemental in the depths of my soul. It was more intimate than any physical connection. I welcomed and feared it in the same breath. Each new inhalation became shallower than the one before it. Dillon leaned in, closing the space between us with deliberate intentions. We were so absorbed in each other's

thoughts. Our eyelids closed and lips joined with impulsive certainty. An electricity coursed through me, more intense than any kiss in my young life.

That euphoric feeling made my ensuing choice unimaginable.

I pushed him away. The heartbroken look on his face crippled me. I didn't know why I'd done it or what to do next. My feeble attempt to analyze Frost's poetic form replaced the awkward silence between us.

We never returned to that pizza shop. That dreamlike-turned-distressing moment became a blemish in our relationship. The color-encoded messages subsided. We remained best friends through times of sadness and joy. But there had been an invisible thread delicately intertwined between our souls, and I had severed that connection after pulling away from our first, and only, kiss.



I WONDER WHERE HE IS now. My brief stroll down memory lane creates a longing desire for a fresh start. I pick up the shoebox full of childhood memories. It contains only pieces of paper, but it feels heavier, as if it holds more weight than it did a few moments ago.

With it nestled under my arm, I retreat down the attic stairs and sink into the cushion on the living room couch. I grab hold of my wineglass, gazing into the half-empty goblet. A strand of wavy brunette hair drifts into my peripheral vision. Tucking it behind my ear, I refocus on what still rests in that amber liquid. Those small bits of cork remain, but they're now motionless, as if inviting their retrieval. It might not be so difficult to remove those fragments. While I ponder the possibility, my thoughts wander elsewhere.



I HAVEN'T APPROACHED this doorstep in over two decades. Sensing the countless impressions from my knuckles, I knock on the wooden door. The sound triggers pleasant memories.

As it swings open, I offer a tentative greeting. "Hi, Mrs. Darby. You might not remember me . . ." I notice moisture in the corner of her eye before she embraces me in a comforting hug.

"Claire." She speaks in an endearing tone, pushing me to arm's length. "You look beautiful, love. You haven't changed a bit. I still see that young girl in your eyes."

"You too." I smile. It might be a small white lie. Mrs. Darby is showing her age, but it's the only proper thing to say. She helped me through such a difficult stretch of childhood.

“Come in, please. I have a kettle for tea on the stove.” Her familiar kitchen hasn’t changed in twenty years. I fondly recall her serving warm cookies and milk for Dillon and me at the same table. “I’m so sorry I didn’t make it to your mother’s funeral. What she did, how she treated you . . .”

“Don’t worry. It’s okay.”

“I never understood how someone could . . . well, you know. It was wrong.”

“Please, think nothing of it. I understand.” I rest my hand atop the one belonging to my true mother and look deep into her eyes. Scared to hear the answer, I still need to ask the question. “Mrs. Darby, can you tell me where Dillon is these days?”

Selfishly, I fear she will tell me about a happy marriage, a gorgeous wife, three kids, and a house in the suburbs with a white picket fence. And a dog. I can’t forget the canine part of my forlorn dream. It was the fairy-tale ending I missed out on due to my lack of courage.

Tears flow unfiltered from Mrs. Darby’s eyes. “Oh, Claire.”

“Mrs. Darby? What is it? Are you okay?” A hollow and foreboding desperation washes over me.

“My baby Dillon. He died in a car accident. Three years ago. He was only thirty-five. Too young.” She fights through the sobs between each fragmented sentence. The grieving mom is answering my question, but she speaks as much to herself as she does to me.

I cover my mouth in disbelief, sorrowful tears mirroring those from Mrs. Darby. “I’m so sorry.” The choking pain in those four syllables carries more empathy than the words themselves ever could.

“I know, honey. It’s been so difficult, so painful. It gets better, but it never seems to go away.” I understood all too well. There is too much pain and loss running rampant in both our lives, so I redirect her toward happy memories of Dillon. As afternoon turns to evening, our tears of sorrow transform into smiles and giggles. The shared pot of chamomile tea and pleasant reminiscences are therapeutic for both of us.

Her small cuckoo clock announces the nine o’clock hour. It’s a reminder of the daunting task awaiting me next door. “I have to go, but it has been so nice to see you, Mrs. Darby. You’ve always known what I need. Thank you so very much.”

As we prepare to part ways in her foyer, Mrs. Darby’s wrinkles press together as she squints at me. She looks deep into my eyes and pats my arm. “You wait here, dear. I have something for you.”

I watch her retreat up the stairs, one slow step at a time. She returns a few moments later with a book in her hands. “For you,” she says, passing it to me. “I

think he meant for you to have this.”

The title on the cover reads *Homecoming*. I’m not sure what to make of this unexpected gift until my gaze falls upon the author’s name. Dillon Darby.

“You made quite an impression on him, you know. He wouldn’t have written this without your encouragement. You take care now, dear.” She ushers me outside. It’s not because she wants me to leave. She senses my anxious desire. To seek out a private place where I might devour this tangible memory of my kindred soul.

I slip through the front door, greeted by a blast of cool air, and make my way toward the attic stairs once more. It isn’t necessary to consume this book in the privacy of my sanctuary, but it feels right.

Nestling into the corner of my cardboard fortress, I flip on the flashlight and pull my knees close. Opening the back cover, I find a photograph of Dillon and his brief author bio, but it’s not enough. I want and need more. Running my index finger over his picture, I caress the author’s face with a delicate touch. How I wish I’d had the courage to do so at that pizza parlor so many years ago. How different might my life have been?

I stare at the book, admiring everything connected to this man. He struggled through literature as a high school student. Now he is a published author. I smile, cherishing how Dillon had always been so perseverant.

With a million other things to do, I focus on the most important one in this moment. I open the novel, flip past the first blank page, and arrive at his opening words.

The dedication read: *For Claire, the Road Not Taken*.

How do I interpret this message? Was it a simple reminiscence of a time long ago? A memorable encounter in the pizza parlor that proved to be a turning point in his life as an author? It might be a safe interpretation, but I yearn for something more. Even if it’s painful to accept, I ache to be the road not taken. I want to be connected with Dillon on a deeper level. I can only hope his story will bring me peace and offer a response to the burning questions in my heart.

My answer arrives before I reach his opening line in the first chapter. There are no words, only three Post-it notes positioned across the width of the page. The trio of colors sends a message never shared in our secret language. Red, yellow, blue: *I love you*.

I will read Dillon’s story in its entirety one day, just not now. Removing each slip of paper from the book, I get to my knees. I place each one in succession along the pane of glass in the attic window. It’s a reminder to the boy somewhere across the way. Even though it may have taken a while, I might finally understand what it means to be home.



### 3

I appreciate the transformative power of words. They're able to replenish the soul, inspiring a person to soar higher than the loftiest clouds. But there's also a dark counterpart with the potential to drag one's hopes deep below the surface. Into the depths of an abyss devoid of any light. I never realized how fast those disparate effects can swing from one extreme to the other.

I clutch the same pilled blanket I used to hide under as a girl. With a storybook and flashlight, I would create an imaginary castle beneath it each night. The cotton fabric protected me from the harsh reality beyond its border. Once able to cover my entire body, it now only reaches my chest. It's proof that some things have grown with time.

I roll over in bed and blink at Dillon's book on the side table. It wasn't a dream. A mockingbird greets the rising sun with its delightful melody. Outside my open window, a gentle breeze ushers the scent of fresh-cut grass into my bedroom. There's so much good to notice in the world. Instead, it's the porcelain plaque with a chipped corner that catches my attention. *Home is where the love is.*

The sign hangs cockeyed next to the door frame. In this singular moment, I become aware how words can force us to face the sobering truth. With all these beautiful reminders of encouragement surrounding me, I realize there is no optimism inside. This is not home. There is no love here.

My choices haunt me. I latched onto a woman who hurt me and pushed away someone who shared nothing but genuine affection with me. Dillon is gone. Forever.

I force a deep breath from my lungs. It's a futile attempt to rescue me from this feeling of utter despair. In an act of psychological self-defense, my thoughts meander somewhere new, down the hallway to the bedroom next door.

Russell is the older brother I admired as a child. He's left me to deal with this physical and emotional debris field by myself. I have no idea who my father is, and given my track record, I'm not sure I want to know.

Everything about my sad reality is in shambles.

I've been treading water for decades, waiting for a monster to drag me beneath the surface. Feeling the weight of my body sinking into this mattress, I

imagine I'm sinking into quicksand. The more I move, the deeper I sink. There must be a better way to go through life.

It's time to face the truth. I'm not cut out for love in any capacity. I never was. Living a peaceful and solitary existence is something many people find rewarding. Why shouldn't I be one of them?



SURPRISINGLY, MY DECISION is liberating, even if I don't know where it will lead me. Abandoning my mind-numbing secretarial position is an easy choice. For years, Donna has wanted sole ownership of our shared condo on the Virginia coast. She'll finally get what she wants. I'm almost forty. I should have a place to call my own.

After making a few phone calls, I arrange for a sizable donation to the local homeless shelter. I'll leave the rest of my mother's possessions for the real estate agent to handle. I have no desire to see them again. The required fees are over the top, but it's worth the chance to flee this empty shell, devoid of love, as soon as possible.



SEATED IN THE CAR, I grip the steering wheel with uncomfortable levels of fear and anxiety. If I let go, I'm afraid I'll spin out of control. My view out the windshield makes me feel like a magnet spinning erratically between its poles. In one moment, the unhappy memories of life in a house that stole so much from me is repellent. Then, loving thoughts of the home next door arrive, pulling me toward something positive.

A breeze blows through the open window and ruffles the pink feather tag on my suitcase. It reveals Dillon's book hiding beneath it. I leaf through the first few pages before finding the epigraph on a page of its own:

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.*

It's all the encouragement I need. *Thank you, Dillon.* The only decision now is which way to head. Things have gone south in the past several days. Heading north sounds like a welcome change. But that direction alone won't suffice. It'll do nothing more than carry me from the Georgia coast where I grew up to Donna and our shared condo in Virginia. I'll add a healthy dose of west to the mix. Chasing the metaphorical sunlight is always a good idea.

After a few hours on the road less traveled, my failing awareness of life's necessities catches up with me. I haven't eaten. My fuel gauge is near empty. And the onslaught of lovebugs raining down on my windshield obscures the view, all the while taunting me. How does the rest of nature find it so easy to identify a compatible mate? Guilt consumes me as I obliterate that soulful connection while driving along these backcountry roads.

The flashing yellow light ahead warns me to slow down. Insects once destined to meet their final resting place on my front bumper deflect to safety. Clint's Country Store sits on the far corner of the lonely intersection. Overgrown fields surround it, hinting at the desirability of this location. Despite the barren landscape, this is what I need right now. A snack and gas refill, so long as the single pump is functional.

My instinctive security radar kicks into gear as I shut off the engine. A scan of the small parking lot reveals two vehicles, calming my nerves. The crunch of gravel beneath my feet followed by a slam of the driver-side door creates momentary silence. The cicadas pause their melodic chirping to assess their own safety.

It reminds me of seventh-grade science class. With each student asked to complete a report on an assigned insect, I got the cicada. Everyone else moaned and groaned about the homework. Not me. It meant a visit to my favorite place in town. Ms. Pickett, the librarian, was a dear friend, even if she was old enough to be my grandmother. She taught me all about the Dewey decimal system. How to navigate the card catalog and find exactly what I was looking for. She did so with the grace and agility of a butterfly floating from one flower petal to the next.

Every other classmate had a single page, as required. Mine had five. It always seemed to be that way with me. My mind got sidetracked by interesting facts. I couldn't help but share them with everyone. The world was a fascinating place, filled with nuggets of wonder to discover. I might not have found them at home, but that didn't mean I'd stop looking for them elsewhere.

I assumed others would want to learn about them too. Our teacher, Ms. Davis, thought otherwise. She stopped me after I'd read the first two pages of my report in front of the class. I did get the chance to share a most curious tidbit about cicadas, though. Unlike butterflies, moths, and many other insects, they don't pupate. They transform from one functioning state to another in a short period of time. Much like human beings.

I suppose it's what I'm doing now, morphing into a different phase of my life. It might not be the direction I'd have chosen as a young girl, but that's okay.

Expectations change. Reality has a way of sneaking in a back door you never knew existed.

The gas pump clicks off, signaling my tank is full. Only then do I notice the request to prepay in capital letters staring me in the face. I must have missed it with all my distracted thoughts. The lovebugs I've been trying to clean from my windshield smear into a gooey mess. It seems appropriate for my day thus far. It's like I'm searching for an answer that doesn't have a question associated with it.

I slip through the front door, hoping Clint won't go Dirty Harry on me.

"Good morning to you, ma'am." To my surprise, he welcomes me into the shop with a smile and pleasant greeting.

"Sorry I didn't come in beforehand to pay. My mind is a bit distracted today." It's best to leave the complete truth in a safe place.

"No worries. Trust is important in our community. And besides, Harry chases down anyone who tries to skip town without paying." Am I vocalizing my thoughts through some unheard language? "I'm kidding . . . about the Harry part."

Clint chuckles as a tiny dachshund trots in from the back room. His owner offers the treat he knows is coming. "This is Harry. Harry, meet . . ."

"Claire." My first name is enough. There's no need to offer more information than necessary. Even if he seems kindhearted and has an adorable dog.

My attention shifts to the small girl sitting in a grocery cart, accompanied by her parents. Dad zips her down the aisle in a mock Formula 1 race, complete with throaty engine sounds. The smile on her face, evidence of unbridled joy, is something I never knew. Jealousy and sadness bubble to the surface.

"Do you have a daughter?"

"What?" I've been staring at the girl with a longing desire. My facial expression reveals more than it should. "No." I offer Clint only that curt reply before excusing myself. I navigate toward the aisle farthest away from him and the blissful family unit. The chocolate bar I grab is a temporary fix, but I'm most comfortable with those kinds.

I return to the register, paying for my gas and short-term sugar rush. "Where are you headed?" Why is every question so difficult to answer today?

"Nowhere in particular." I slide my money across the counter. It's an invitation to quicken our transaction so I can hasten my journey to nowhere.

"Ah, the wandering type, are you?" His gaze flits toward me, even if my eyes focus on the twenty-dollar bill still resting between us. "Sometimes meandering is the only way to find where you're meant to be." The ding from his cash register awakens something inside me. "But knowing when you arrive is



a tricky thing. Best to keep your eyes open, lest you miss finding that golden ticket.”

He pushes the chocolate toward me and winks. “Safe travels, Claire.” I gather up the change, grab my candy bar, and head for the exit. “There’s more than five.”

“Excuse me?” Although Clint’s comments are prying, I can’t seem to ignore them.

“Golden tickets. There’s more than five. An infinite number are out there, if you know where to look for them.”

I offer a closed-lip smile and push through the door. I pause with it midway open. The creak from it reverberates in my memory. It sounds a lot like my footsteps on the set of attic stairs that’s now in my past.



MY TRAVELS CONTINUE more west than north into the afternoon hours. I stop in a more populated town for one more gas refill and a restroom break. But my recollection of the visit to Clint’s store stays with me.

What awaits me around the next bend in my journey? I have no idea. That scares and excites me. How can two divergent emotions exist in the same space? It makes little sense. That same feeling greeted me while I sat in the driveway earlier today. I’m thinking my rash decision may be ill-advised. Remaining in the safety of a known environment, even a caustic one, might be the more prudent choice.

Clint’s words and his signature southern accent repeat in my mind. *Keep your eyes open.* It’s more difficult to do as I squint through the glare of the setting sun. Navigating through the Atlanta area, I feel that magnetic force from earlier more strongly now. It pushes me away from the overpopulation surrounding me. I know with certainty that urban living is not in my future. There are too many people and countless opportunities for things to go awry. Best to limit my level of human interaction. My car almost steers itself around the city’s perimeter on autopilot. The number of cars eventually diminishes, replaced by backcountry roads that create a sense of welcome harmony.

The waning daylight and long hours behind the wheel remind me I need to find a hotel for the evening. I have been so focused on listening to my thoughts and appreciating the scenery. The rolling hills transform into foothills. Mountains in the distance seem to draw me toward them with an undeniable energy.

The pull becomes stronger as I cross a stone bridge. Tree saplings line both sides of the street. A vision of this small town a few decades in the future greets me with a warmth I don't see but feel. *Keep your eyes open.* The charming character of each storefront speaks to my soul, but the nostalgic aura lasts only a few moments. A half mile ahead, I emerge from a metaphorical tunnel. A magical castle that I thought lived only in my childhood dreams rises before me.

It's bigger than what I need, but this old house speaks to me. The planks of wood, exposed to the elements, remind me of the scars I hide. I sense this structure needs my help to protect it in the same way. Without realizing it, I've parked my car along the curb and am standing on the sidewalk. Its innate beauty mesmerizes me. The wraparound porch accentuates its angles and curves. I can tell there's a story hidden inside these walls. And dare I say, this place is begging for me to understand it better.

Others have passed over this opportunity in favor of more appealing options. But this dwelling spellbinds me. Although my eyes are wide open, it's my sense of smell that beckons me. Jasmine. The name of Dillon's oldest sister. A tingling sensation radiates from the inside as I notice a sign in the front yard.

It always felt like a curse, being born on February 29. My mother used it as an excuse for a smaller celebration each year. She promised a bigger and more impressive one every fourth birthday. They all ended up the same, and of the smallish variety. Why should I have expected anything different? I guess it's another example of that youthful naïveté. I hoped for a miraculous change in circumstances that never had a chance.

There's no room for negativity in this moment. Those final four digits of the real estate agent's phone number stir curiosity inside me: 0229. My birthdate. I catch my breath before the ensuing inhalation captivates me. The faint scent grows stronger. A hint of jasmine floats on the gentle breeze and arrives with tender intensity as a kiss on my cheek.

My heart expands. The deep-seated longings of a young girl convince me against all reason. It might not be home and it doesn't make sense, but this is exactly where I'm supposed to be.



## 4

The sound of rain floods my thoughts with unpleasant memories. The sea of tears shed throughout my life is already overflowing. I don't need any more. It's why I prefer radiant sunshine over rain-soaked days during the stormy season.

I listen with piqued curiosity. The ping of each raindrop hits something metal with a sense of enthusiasm. My eyes remain closed as I absorb this unexpected and cheerful energy. It's nothing like the monotonous thud of morning showers falling on my roof shingles. Still protected in the darkness of sleep, my mind works through the confusion. I'm caught somewhere between bliss and misery, a vast expanse to navigate. Summoning the courage to face the reality of another dreary day, I open my eyes and smile.

In the cocoon of my car, I watch water droplets trace paths down the passenger-side window. The view couldn't be more beautiful. I snuggle into the crevice between my seat and the center console. It would be uncomfortable on any other day but not on this one. Are the tears blurring my vision from Mother Nature or from me? It doesn't matter. My grin widens as the white farmhouse smiles back at me.



PIGEON GROVE LIVES up to its namesake: Things *fly* here. I never imagined it possible for a small town to complete a real estate transaction so quickly, but in less than two weeks, all the necessary documents have been recorded. I'm the new owner of a quaint cottage nestled among rolling foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

The alacrity of the sale was astonishing, but it's outdone by the generosity bestowed upon me during the process. When I was unable to find temporary housing on short notice, the real estate agent insisted I stay inside my future abode until everything was official. Skepticism must have been written all over my face. I was quickly assured that the previous owners authorized the thoughtful offer.

It was a kindhearted gesture but immediately raised suspicions. Was this some way to manipulate me before I signed the paperwork? I'd never experienced that level of graciousness from a stranger. Despite my apprehension, however, everything worked out exactly as I had hoped.

The quiet town has been that. I've intentionally kept my travels confined to the neighboring town. It's best to keep a safe distance from folks nearby who might complicate matters, even if that real estate agent's kindness was an unexpected and welcome surprise.



I GATHER SOME ESSENTIALS from the grocery store: food and a few cleaning supplies. I work through the downstairs first, one room at a time. It's cathartic to clear away layers of dust and discover a hint of the sparkle hidden beneath each surface. The kitchen is my favorite and where I begin. It breathes life into me. There is space to move around, but it still feels intimate and private. This is a place where new things are born from simple ingredients. Like sugar, butter, flour, and perhaps a small dash of hope.

The single window over the cavernous porcelain sink gets stuck when I try to open it. A little perseverance proves successful as the familiar scent of jasmine floats inside. I almost don't notice the unsightly field of overgrown weeds next door.

In due time, I'll find out who owns that property. It shouldn't be difficult to have it cleared. My practical mind taps me on the shoulder. *Claire? Hello, there. Consider this your wake-up call. You don't have that much money or a job to sustain your long-term presence here.*

I'll worry about that later. I lean against the counter, close my eyes, inhale, and appreciate the sanctity of my quiet refuge.

*Knock, knock.*

The jarring sound travels through the living room. It pushes that comfortable and intoxicating floral scent back outside the window. So much for peaceful silence. If I ignore whoever it is, maybe they'll give up and leave.

*Knock, knock, knock*, now delivered with more insistence. I forgot that my car parked along the curb gives me away. I tiptoe through the hallway, wondering if I can catch a glimpse of my uninvited visitor before he or she sees me.

She's holding a covered basket. Looking back over her shoulder, she mutters something about behaving. Please don't let her have a dog. I'm trying to get rid

of the mess, not add to it. I move to stand before my screen door, still and silent, and wait for her to notice me.

“Oh goodness!” She almost drops what she’s carrying. “Sorry, I didn’t see you there. You snuck up on me. My name is Lydia. And this . . .” She turns around revealing someone less furry than a dog, but only barely. The mat of unruly hair hiding beneath the man’s hat could use a comb through it.

“Hickory trees have strong roots. Keeps that surly wind from blowing them over. Fine craftsmanship here, don’t you think?” He’s running his hand over the smooth railing leading up to *my* front porch.

“Yes, it’s exquisite. Now come up here and meet our new neighbor.” That last word causes a chill to travel up my spine. I didn’t move here to become neighborly. She turns back to me. “Meet my husband, Hank. Welcome to Pigeon Grove.” Her smile is warm, even if there’s a hint of embarrassment for the gentleman now standing beside her. He holds his floppy hat respectfully in both hands.

I stare at the two of them for a moment. I mustn’t be rude. It’s not in my nature. I swing the door open and step into the doorway at the same time Lydia begins to make her way inside. “Sorry, dear. Old habits and all.” She shuffles backwards and allows me space to make my way onto the porch.

“I’m Claire.” I reach out my hand as if greeting a new business client, keeping a full arm’s length between us. Now what? My eyes flit around. I notice cracks in the wood planks that make up the front porch. More work to do. Small flecks of white paint from the flaking house accumulate like snow that rarely falls here.

I finally glance toward the couple. They seem to have forgotten about me, preoccupied by the wooden swing beside me. Suspended by two new metal chains, they don’t match the worn appearance of everything around it.

“Would you like to have a seat?” It’s better than inviting them inside.

“Thank you, that would be lovely.” Lydia smiles as Hank secures her hand, allowing his wife to take a seat first. I never tire of gentle mannerisms. They’re like soft pillows for the soul to rest upon. The couple swings with softness back and forth. It’s like they’ve received an unexpected gift.

“It seems like you’ve done this a few times before.” There’s a natural cadence to their routine. I settle on the small table that doubles as an extra chair.

“Indeed. Every day for the last eighteen months.” Lydia’s smile grows wider as she presses her shoulder against Hank’s.

“Until the last several weeks.” Hank adds the factual note to Lydia’s dreamy reminiscence. Did she just elbow him in the side? “But it was our pleasure, of course.”

“Excuse me?” This is one of the many reasons being neighborly isn’t on my short list of things to do. I have no idea where this conversation has come from, nor where it’s headed.

“Oh dear. My manners. I thought you knew.” My confusion must be evident. “This was our home before putting it up for sale a few years ago. We never wanted to move, but business grew faster than expected. It’s why we purchased the larger lot outside of town.”

Sitting upright but relaxed, Hank peeks inside the basket on Lydia’s lap. “It’s ironic we live in the Peach State. More than 50 percent of all peaches in the United States come from California, not Georgia.” He’s full of interesting information, like the studious girl I used to be in grade school. “Still makes for a good life here, though.” A smile sneaks across his lips. Someone else might think it’s from fond memories of financial success, but I know better. Especially since his hand has now found Lydia’s as they sway in tune to a silent song known by them alone.

His tender touch creates a radiant glow in Lydia’s cheeks and a soft nostalgia in her voice. “We’d sit here for hours, sipping our shared glass of sweet tea while watching the sun dip below the horizon.” Their loving relationship is infectious. I can’t help but allow myself to slip into the past, to a time and place where love once lived, albeit briefly.

I have shared but a few cursory words since my guests arrived. So much for not being rude. My mind plays tricks on me. Although I am charmed by their cozy love, the smile involuntarily playing across my lips fades. I came here to forget these memories. To start anew, not stir up confusing emotions that I can no longer do anything about. The blissful couple seems to read my body language like an open book.

“Hank, we need to stop by the bank on the way home, before it closes.”

“I did that . . .” She provides a subtle squeeze to his hand. “Right, we need to make that deposit. Best be going.”

“These are for you, Claire. A welcome gift from Hank and me.” Lydia hands me the basket as we all rise to our feet in unison.

“Did you know scientists label peaches as the fruit of calmness? They’re known to reduce anxiety and are a symbol of good luck, protection, and longevity in China.” Hank begins making his way back down the porch steps, studying the vacant flower box beside it.

I’m taken aback as Lydia pats my arm and whispers in my ear. “Don’t tell him I said this, but there’s no reason to limit those good-luck charms to a single country, don’t you think?”

Hank replaces the hat on his head, doing his best to tuck loose strands beneath it. "This soil is some of the most fertile in the area." Guilt crawls across my skin as I notice crumbling soil in the planter I didn't even realize was there. I've taken ownership of a house that has known so much love but haven't been able to resuscitate it to its prior glory. I have only been here for a few weeks, but I still feel like a failure.

"I apologize for letting things lapse. I've been focusing on everything inside first. I'll do my best to bring this place back to the beautiful place it once was."

"Oh, that's not what he means, dear. He's talking about that overgrown mess over there." She motions to the field of weeds. "That used to be a finely tilled arrangement of plentiful crops. After we ran out of space, that's when we moved. All that land over there is yours as well." I'm not sure I appreciate the responsibility for maintaining that *mess*. "I guess it shows how quickly weeds can overtake a garden when not tended to with care." Lydia's comment strikes a disquieting chord somewhere deep inside me.

She rests her fingertips on my forearm, bringing me back to the present. "We apologize for staying so long, Claire. We only wanted to stop in for a quick visit and welcome you to Pigeon Grove."

"Interesting thing about pigeons . . ."

"Hank, we should be going."

"No, that's okay. I like learning new things. Your husband has been quite successful at helping me do so over the past thirty minutes." I smile, appreciating someone who has the same desire for knowledge as me.

"See, she's a smart one, just like you." Hank takes his wife's hand and continues. "Pigeons are private birds. The chicks don't reveal themselves to humans until they're fully mature. And they have an innate ability to find their way home, no matter how hard people try to confuse them."

"And speaking of home," Lydia chimes, "that's exactly where we should be heading."

"After the bank, though." Hank winks at Lydia, their secret code not slipping past my perceptive gaze.

As the couple strolls down the sidewalk together, I'm not sure what I'm feeling. I find this charming couple endearing, but there's still a big part of me that wants to pull back, inside the house and inside myself. I'm caught in a state of confusion, just like those pigeons. But it's clear I'm not destined to find my way back home.

A thought slips in through one of these secret back doors that life tries to hide from us. Maybe I'm still only a chick, waiting to become a proper grown

bird ready to fly. Hard as I try, it's impossible to relinquish that sliver of hope, however tiny it might be.





## 5

It might be some weird synchronicity that exists between owners of the same house, but I somehow doubt it. I'm halfway through my glass of lemonade when they stroll down the sidewalk together. At the same time each day. Lydia is always on the inside while Hank embraces his role as the chivalrous knight. He serves as a human shield against wayward splashes from puddles in the street.

"Good afternoon, Claire." I hear Lydia's greeting and recognize the implied question hiding behind it: *How are you?* I suppose it's a natural byproduct of small-town life. Everyone knows everything. Or wants to, at least. She waves with one hand while the other remains interlocked with her partner's.

"Hi, Lydia. Beautiful weather for a walk, isn't it?"

"With a companion like this, every opportunity is a perfect one." She wraps her fingers around Hank's arm and squeezes with tenderness. He smiles and tips his hat toward me.

Each afternoon, he offers an interesting tidbit of trivia in his signature fashion. "What's my thought for today, Hank?" I call from the porch as I swing gently. The space between my toes and the wooden railing is the perfect distance. Each push creates a tranquil rocking motion.

"That's some mighty weak tea you have there." He squints toward the half-empty glass of lemonade—fresh squeezed, of course. Is there any other kind?

One summer, years ago, I opened a lemonade stand outside the public library and netted almost five dollars. And I'm sure it was Ms. Pickett's advertising, or cajoling of patrons, that allowed me to make even that much. It wasn't the money that motivated me. Rather, it was the surprised smile when those unsuspecting customers tasted it. The tiniest hint of lavender in my recipe made all the difference.

"That's because it's not tea," I tell Hank. "It's lemonade. With a twist." I've always kept the presence of that secret ingredient to myself. Have I stumbled upon another example of small-town persuasion? Some people can extract thoughts that might otherwise have stayed hidden.

"Did you know the *-ade* in *lemonade* means it doesn't contain 100 percent juice?" He glances up at me, slowing his shuffle down the sidewalk, awaiting my response.

“No, I did not.” He seems proud to share these obscure facts with me each day. And to be honest, I enjoy it. As much for seeing how it changes his mood as for the knowledge. He lights up. It’s like I’m helping him, even though it makes little sense. “So why then isn’t it called ‘iced tea-ade’? I guess that doesn’t exactly roll off the tongue, does it?”

“Ah, and there you stumble upon a peculiar conundrum.” He pauses and looks at me quizzically. “There’s no juice in tea, but I suppose it is interesting they chose not to call it ‘helio-tea,’ since *helio-* means ‘from the sun.’ It’s the only way to make it, you know. The Georgia sunshine has magical powers.”

I offer a kind smile as the couple continues down the walkway without another word. We’ve become familiar with this routine. They return down the other side of the street a few minutes later. Their final wave and wish for a pleasant evening occur as I take the last sip of my lemonade.

I’ve invited them onto the porch many times over the past several weeks. I only do it on good days, though, ones when I’m able to push those unpleasant memories into the safe recesses of my mind. Two things continue battling for my attention: the safety of ignorance and a risky acceptance of hope for something so beautiful. How do I choose? Hank and Lydia are the epitome of a perfect couple. Seeing them treat each other with so much love? On those more difficult days, it’s painful.

Why do I shy away from tea? Everyone else seems to love it. Am I destined to be eccentric in everything I do? A few granules of sugar cling to lemon pulp at the bottom of my empty glass. It reminds me why I prefer lemonade. I appreciate the delicate balance of sweet and sour. How two different things combine to create something delicious is a refreshing realization.



I HAVE BEEN SPENDING more time walking up and down Main Street. Slowly, I’m expanding my acceptance of Pigeon Grove. I have Hank to thank for that. There’s a part of me that longs for more of his peculiar insights. I buy fruits and vegetables from him I don’t need. I could choose to stop in for a chat only, but I’m not ready for that level of geniality yet.

Something is different about Hank when I visit his shop. He’s less analytical and distracted than he is on those afternoon walks with Lydia. He becomes softhearted and emotional in his store. Can being around produce have that effect on someone? If anyone knows, he would be the person to ask. I’ll do that someday, when I have more gumption. For now, I stroll back down the street

with another paper bag full of peaches and lemons. More of the former as the latter always seems in short supply.

I push open my front door and instinctively move toward the kitchen. I pull Lydia's cookbook from my shelf and thumb to the page with her peach tart recipe. It was nice of her to lend it to me. I'm slowly filling my house with new things, while keeping a few of the old ones hidden away in a safe place.

Tracing my index finger down the ingredient list, I find mint and fresh orange juice. Of all the fruit on my counter, an orange is not one of them. I pull the carton of store-bought juice from the refrigerator. Close enough. Grabbing a pair of snipping scissors from the drawer, I meander toward the front porch. Those vacant flower boxes now overflow with green herbs. The varied scents and textures add something inviting to the farmhouse curb appeal. And it's nice to be part of an organic and self-sustaining growth process.

I slip back inside and turn the knob on my radio, tuning to the local country station. I never listen to this music, but everyone else here does. I might as well give it an honest go. I grab the wooden spoon reserved for propping open the kitchen window. Once a willing partner, it now needs a bit more persuasion to cooperate with my desire for fresh air.

I glide around the room, from the counter to the refrigerator and back to the cupboard. There's a natural flow to my movements. They're somehow in sync with a combination of the music's melody and the recipe ingredients. That thought about lemonade resurfaces. Sweet and sour. How two seemingly unrelated qualities can fit so well together. How is it that music and peaches blend with such harmony? I sprinkle mint into the bowl as my thoughts, baking and otherwise, merge as one. Is it possible to mix different things elsewhere in life to create something new and . . . ?

I can't think the word that follows, let alone vocalize it. Best not allow my wishes to float too high. Hope is a dangerous tightrope to walk. Especially when there's nothing to balance myself with, and no safety net below to catch me when I fall.



WITH MY PEACH TART baking in the oven, I lean against the counter. Closing my eyes, I inhale the complementary scents of fruit and jasmine. More yin and yang, the smells coming from inside and outside. But it's the song on the radio that permeates the room and conjures a sense that has no name.

*Love was always for someone else, but in a world of so few surprises, there's still a few surprises left.*

I think about my path through life so far. I've always known where I'm headed, even if it hasn't been toward a place I dreamed of being. But now I don't know. About anything. A foreboding thought creeps into my consciousness. I made a courageous choice to move here, but I feel more lost than ever. Still, I wonder, might this be the best thing that could have happened to me?

There's something about the delicious combination of lyrics and melody. It creates a moment of internal radiance, coming from a place I never knew existed. I open my eyes to make sure I'm not dreaming. That's when I see him.

Seated on the ground across the street, a man stares intently at my farmhouse. He tilts his head to the right, then the left, before pulling out a pencil and placing it in his mouth. Clenching his teeth, he reaches a hand into his bag. He retrieves a sketchbook, never taking eyes off his subject. He continues to study it with an intense interest.

I watch as his gaze darts back and forth between the house and his pad of paper. It's mesmerizing. There's an intimate connection between the physical world and his mind's eye. I sense his imagination transforming an inanimate object into something full of emotion.

Guilty thoughts for spying on him creep in, but I can't look away. Besides, he's drawing my home. *Home*. It's the first time I've referred to this place by that name. What is happening? Things are becoming hazy and distorted. Should I embrace this unknown feeling or push it aside?

He glances up at the roofline. As if reading my thoughts, he slides his eyes toward the kitchen window. And finds me. In a panic, I pull back, hiding behind the thin fabric of the curtain. My heart pounds in my chest, perfectly in sync with the rhythm of that song.

I tug the curtains closed and stare at my trembling hands. Even if this reaction resembles those of my childhood, it doesn't feel like the same thing. It's not fear but something else. I recall that pilled blanket. It did little to protect me from the harsh reality waiting outside its permeable border.

It creates doubt that a tattered strip of plaid cloth will do any better. A freshening breeze blows through the open window, revealing a glimpse of him. Still looking right at me. Or through me. Nothing can keep him from seeing deep into my soul. Especially at a moment when I'm this vulnerable.



## 6

The charred scent of peaches invades my conscience like smelling salts. A coffee jingle about filling your cup to the brim every day replaces soothing music on the radio. I peel back the curtain nervously. It's all gone, the calming influence of that song and the presence of that mystifying man. My heartbeat is out of sync with everything surrounding me. How long have I been adrift in this unfamiliar state?

I recognize the shrill coming from my phone only after the third ring. I should thank the person on the other end. Without it, I might have noticed the smoke seeping through the oven door a little too late.

"Hello?" I am out of breath, though I haven't undertaken any physical exertion to warrant it.

"Claire Bear?" I haven't heard that name in years. Why does this ride through life feel like a sadistic combination of roller coaster and funhouse? The monotonous climb followed by a breathless fall is nauseating enough. But the assortment of trick mirrors and shifting floors only adds to the confusion. Are there any straight-and-level pieces on this journey? The dizzying effects keep me from reorienting myself when I need it the most.

"Hello, Russell." I don't use his childhood nickname, Stover. He was the sweetest big brother a sister could dream of while growing up. We never talked about what happened behind closed doors with our abusive mother. But he was always there to refocus my attention on something more positive.

I turn off the oven, retrieve my baking disaster from inside, and slide the window open further. A faint drift of smoke dissipates through the wider gap. The pane of glass stays in place without the need for an even larger wooden spoon that I don't have. The house seems to know there's too much to handle in this moment, and it has little to do with the mess in the kitchen.

I might as well take another look. Craning my neck both ways, I hope to catch a final glimpse of that mysterious artist on the sidewalk. Nothing. The phone cord wraps around me like a lasso, pulling me back into the present.

"Claire? Are you okay?" Am I okay? Why didn't he call to ask that while I was forced to sift through piles of boxes with bad memories by myself? Cynical

thoughts bubble to the surface, but my softhearted center prevails. Could he be calling to apologize?

“I’m all right. Getting by.” The internal walls rise, a self-defense mechanism in the form of short answers. It’s easier to leave that extra space, where words normally go, to assess the situation. I did it with Hank and Lydia in the beginning. Trust is a difficult thing to grant when the rug has been pulled out from beneath you so often in the past.

“Donna gave me this number, but she didn’t say much. Just that you were off on a quest to find yourself or something. Was there any damage back home? I saw that a wicked storm passed through Virginia earlier in the week.”

Tumultuous weather manifests itself in many ways. I’ve been so consumed with establishing my new life in Georgia. I haven’t shared my decision to move with anyone but those directly affected. My former boss and my roommate. Am I a hypocrite? I hold it against Russell for not staying in touch with me, but I’m doing the exact same thing.

“I’m not in Virginia.” He already knows this, but how do I divulge the details of my choice? It still doesn’t make complete sense to me.

“Have you finally embraced the merits of a vacation, an escape from the daily monotony of your routine?”

I’m searching for more of that uniform repetition, not less. Only in a different and more secluded place. I suppose I could’ve found a way to make it work back in Virginia, where I was living in mediocrity, but I chose a new path.

“I moved to Georgia.” I blurt it out. There’s no other way. It spills from my mouth in a slightly more elegant fashion than the burnt peach tart coming out of the oven.

“Georgia? Why?” I notice the genuine confusion in Russell’s voice. A little sister can always tell, even after drifting apart from her sole sibling. I hear his silent thoughts percolating beneath the surface. That coffee ad replays in my mind. The slow drip of assumptions fills a cup I’d rather dump down the sink.

“I’m not sure I’ve figured out why yet. It just felt as though it’s what I was supposed to do.” Who am I kidding? Talking in vague generalities doesn’t sound like me at all. I always have a plan regarding where I’m going and why I’m headed there.

“You’ve never been one to leave the safety of a boat and jump into muddy water.” Russell’s voice becomes softer with hints of worry nestled between his words. I know what he’s referring to.

We’d sneak out onto the lake together, just him and me. With our mother drunk, she never knew we were gone. It was a fringe benefit that we were both far away from potential physical harm. Russell grabbed the fishing gear. I would

clutch the safety vests, as if my life depended on it. The unknown terrified me. If I couldn't see what was beneath the surface, I didn't trust it. He would egg me on, tempting me to jump in the water after him. I remained in the boat with all three latches of that preserver connected and snug across my torso. As scared as I was to be out there, I suppose the fact that I went anyway says even more about the perceived danger inside our house.

Alluding to this is Russell's way of asking a question when he doesn't know how to. He has only willingly entered one uncomfortable discussion in his life. I realize where he's trying to go with this conversation, talking in analogies, but I don't make it easy for him. I stay silent, waiting for him to jump in the same pool of water with me.

"Does this have anything to do with . . . ?" He still can't do it. Even as a grown adult.

"No, it has nothing to do with her." Am I lying to myself? I'm not sure. Did our mother influence my decision? Maybe. Is she the sole reason I did it? Probably not. I know there's hesitancy in my voice, and I'm certain Russell detects it. The silence between us stretches out like a piece of taffy on a hot summer day. The sugary thread holding it together becomes weaker with each passing moment. Is he about to do it? For real? Will he apologize?

"Did Aunt Claire say yes?" I hear the excited plea from my teenage niece, Lizzie, in the background.

"Did I say yes to what?" Understanding my brother has yet to change, I let my focus turn toward curiosity.

"This actually works out even better now." As a single father after a messy divorce, Russell lives with Lizzie in Chattanooga. I hear her chattering nonstop about going to the beach and visiting the boardwalk. And painting—can she bring her supplies too?

"You're planning a visit?" There's nothing to warrant it, but hope rises along with an uptick in my tone. While I cherish my time alone, family is still a higher priority. Especially since the two of them are all I have left.

"Sort of." I hear guilt in his voice, which means he notices the hopefulness in mine and he's not coming. "It would only be Lizzie." I look down and find myself unwound from the phone cord, and so many other things. There's that dangerous tightrope of hope. I lean against the refrigerator door, thankful for its help in keeping me from falling to the floor.

He only calls when he needs something. Or on those holidays where families are supposed to talk with each other. It's the middle of summer, so I should have known which type of call this would be.

“I’ve been presented an interesting opportunity.” He pauses, waiting to see if I will allow him to continue.

“Yes?”

“You know my landscape business has always been a mom-and-pop deal? Residential service only? Well, I happened across an influential client who passed my name to a corporate contact. They think my work could improve worker morale and inspire creativity. Imagine that, right?”

Imagine that. A man does nothing to boost the spirits of his own sister, but he’s willing and capable of doing so for a stranger. An involuntary and exasperated huff escapes my lungs.

“Claire, it’s tough being a single dad, trying to make ends meet and still give Lizzie the attention she deserves. I fought so hard for her.” There’s guilt dripping between his words. I remember it as the one occasion he dealt with confrontation head-on. Fighting for sole custody of his daughter. I had never seen him so tenacious and driven before. I can’t abandon family, no matter how distant we’ve become as brother and sister. Besides, it’s been forever since I’ve spent quality time with my niece.

“How long?”

“One week, two at most. They’re looking for a comprehensive proposal. For an overhaul of their fifty-acre corporate headquarters.”

There’s nothing for a teenager to do in Pigeon Grove, and I worry Lizzie will be bored. It’ll push me way outside my comfort zone, forcing me to explore the community I’ve avoided becoming a part of. “Sure, Russell. Tell Lizzie I look forward to seeing her.”

“Really? Oh, Claire, thank you so much.” The relief in his voice is palpable. It’s nice to be needed. “I don’t know what I would have done if you’d said no. You’re the last person I could think of who might help.” I wish he had stopped after the simple heartfelt offering of thanks.

After hanging up the phone, I clean up the mess in my kitchen. A new melody and set of lyrics accompany me through the process.

*The closer you get, the further I fall. I’ll be over the edge now in no time at all.*

I peek outside again. In both directions, there’s nothing but an empty sidewalk. A periodic crack interrupts the consistency of the smooth expanse. After shutting the window, I draw the curtains closed.

When I grab my failed attempt at a peach tart from the counter, the crust crumbles in my hands. I tip it into the trash can, promising myself I’ll try again tomorrow. With the right ingredients and focus, I might keep from scorching something in my life.





## 7

The overnight storm was relentless. It pounded on the roof all night, thunderous claps mixing with similar thoughts in my mind. The sound of rain failed to soothe me the way it did on my first morning in Pigeon Grove. Wind howled, and the house creaked, as if pleading for mercy. My physical and emotional joints do the same as dawn greets me. With every shared moment here, I realize this structure has a lot in common with me.

With sleepy eyes and a coffeepot beneath the running faucet, I pull open the curtains. Sunlight fills the room. Weather can change so quickly. It brings something resembling a smile to my face despite the weight of my thoughts.

Heaviness, or the lack of it, arrives in a more pragmatic and immediate way. When I look down at the glass container meant to provide me with a morning caffeine boost, it's less than half full. There's a small stream of water meandering through the metal fixture and into the basin. It reminds me of a slithering snake attempting to go unnoticed. The meager pressure coming from the spigot spoils its attempt to elude me. It would normally be a good sign to see no puddles when I peek under the sink, but not this time. It means the source of my problem is on the outside.

We're in sync once again. This structure has surrendered some of its gusto, just like I have. My bubbling enthusiasm upon arriving here has been on a steady decline. My pattern of two steps forward and one back has flip-flopped over the past couple weeks. The serendipitous discovery of this house was a euphoric moment for me. It's not lost on me how sad it is that I feel more connected to a human habitat than I do any other person in my life. But I have developed a camaraderie with Hank and Lydia. That's something I was neither wanting nor expecting. Another small step in a positive direction, I suppose.

Still, my conversation with Russell? And the unexplained appearance of that man on the sidewalk? It's all so confusing. My emotions are being tugged every which way, and I can't wrap my head around everything. I moved here to simplify things, not complicate them. So far, small-town life is turning out to be more chaotic and complex than my suburban existence.



I WANDER DOWN MAIN Street like a child looking for her lost puppy dog. It's only as I arrive at the door to Hank and Lydia's produce shop that I realize my intended destination. Over the past several weeks, I've come here to short-circuit the daily conversations in front of my house. A way to protect and preserve my private time on the porch. Alone. Now, I seek their companionship, not fruit I don't need.

"Good morning to you, Claire. What can I get for you today, the usual?" Hank grins, his tone casual, so different from the detail-oriented person who passes me on the sidewalk each day.

"Six peaches, one orange, and all the lemons you have, please." I keep hoping he'll inundate me with more yellow fruit than I'm able to carry, but it never works out that way. He always seems in short supply. The silence between us, while awkward to me, doesn't seem to bother Hank a bit. He's humming to a song on the radio. Something about rainfall in Georgia. I watch him gather only the best selection from his stock for me. It's a personal touch I appreciate.

He chuckles midway through the chorus. "Speaking of rain, someone should remind Mother Nature to turn off her faucet in the sky. We've gotten more wet stuff than we can handle over the past week."

Comments about water and faucets trigger something. Is it a desire for information or a need for connection? In this strange aquatic parlance, I'm the beaver building a dam that holds the floodgates closed. Why does it take so much courage to initiate a simple conversation? I already know the answer. Words have always held such power for me. Sometimes you don't realize how influential they can be until they're out there. At that point, it's too late. They can't be taken back.

"So, I have a problem with my plumbing. Is there someone in town who might help?" I find it harder to say than I imagined it could be.

"You're looking at him. Water pressure, right? I'll fix that up for you in no time. Meant to do it myself but never got around to it. We should be able to pick up some couplers and a pipe wrench at Turner's Hardware." Suddenly, Hank is talkative and anxious. Those pesky words come back to haunt me. Why am I asking for help? I'm still not ready to invite someone into the sanctity of my home.

There's that word again. *Home*. It's becoming a more frequent occurrence in my daily vocabulary. "That's okay. I know you're busy, and . . . On second thought, I might try to tackle it myself." The humming stops, and his gaze dips toward the ground. He grabs a peach from atop his carefully constructed fruit pyramid.

What did I say? Do people take that unkindly to a refusal of help? I don't understand the proper etiquette of this new lifestyle yet. "Where's Lydia?"

"At the farm, checking on some crops after that storm last night." There's a slight upturn in his mood at the mention of her name. "It's her happy place since . . ." His head droops back down again. Since what? He seems somehow uneasy on those strolls with his wife along my stretch of sidewalk. But I can tell he enjoys them too.

"You like those afternoon walks with her, don't you?"

A sheepish grin spreads across his face. "As much for the company as where it takes me. Even if there is some sadness to it."

There's a natural emotional connection with my newest friend. My tone becomes soft and empathetic. "How so?"

His hands clutch the sides of my paper bag filled with fruit, creases forming from his strong grip. Hank's lost in a contemplative state before he releases his hold and places a final lemon in my collection. "The wet weather . . . it dampens my mood sometimes."

"Me too." It's true, it does, but I know there's something more to his comment. "You remember that thing they say about dancing in the rain and all, right?" I smile at him.

"I've always had two left feet." He grins with appreciation as our own friendly clichéd dance begins.

"It only takes putting one foot in front of the other." I take hold of a mock partner and begin the first few steps of a waltz.

"Only time will tell, I suppose." Back and forth, it's a game of wits as he passes me the bag of fruit, an attempt to disrupt my concentration.

"Shouldn't be too tough, you're fit as a fiddle." I have several more lined up and ready to go.

"All's well that ends well." He winks at me, and a chilling sensation crawls from my toes to the top of my head. The way he said it and the grin on his face? He knows something I don't. It's not a comfortable feeling. Especially for someone who needs to understand everything that's happening around them.

It summons an image of *him*, the man with no name whom I somehow already know. "Have you seen this . . . man, hanging out on the sidewalk across the street from my place?" I try to suppress the enchanted tone in my voice. Thinking about that moment creates a wave of emotion, even though nothing happened. Hank moves from humming to whistling, a sign that our figurative dance was exactly what he needed.

"You must be talking about Jack." For some strange reason, the sound of his name warms my heart. I don't understand why this is, but I can't deny it. "Seen

him a few times. Only thing I know about him is that he moved to Pigeon Grove about a year ago. He asked my permission to use the house as a subject for his art. Said the structure spoke to him in some quiet but powerful way.”

There’s that sensation again, a connection with something intangible but undeniably real. As chatty as I was, I retreat into silence, trying to grab hold of that elusive emotion that has no name. “He’s not a talkative one, similar to you in the beginning.” Hank pulls me from the murky cloud of ambiguity. “You should mingle with some of the other folks around town.” He pauses, flashing me a confusing smile before continuing. “Stanley will have what you need for that repair. And if you’d like some help, you know where to find me.”

“Your last name is Charles, right?” I’m not sure how this sudden realization arrives in my mind.

“Indeed.”

“But the shop is named Peterson Produce.”

“You’re a perceptive one.” He grins at me, knowing that my statement doubles as a question. “It’s Lydia’s maiden name. When we first embarked upon this adventure together, her dad provided us with the money to help get us started.” His gaze wanders over the expanse of their shop with fond reminiscence. “It’s the least we could do to show our appreciation. And I’ve always admired alliteration.” He chuckles, sharing another wink and a warm smile. “If you’d like some help with that pesky plumbing problem, you know where to find me.”

“Thanks, Hank.” It’s fitting how his name is embedded in that word of gratitude. I push through the door with more enthusiasm than when entering earlier. There was something therapeutic about my visit. I’ve suddenly realized reaching out to someone is as important as being reached out to. Even in the microcosm of a ten-minute sojourn, my thoughts have traveled everywhere. From blissful to discomfort to the unknown. Each of them felt . . . valuable and precious in its own way.

My planned route goes right, but I turn left instead. I have a bag full of more peaches than I need and barely enough lemons for a pitcher of lemonade. But I should have room for a few plumbing supplies. I float down the street, humming to the music still playing in my mind. Even though I have no partner, it’s a beautiful waltz. I gaze through the windows of each storefront, surprised when I stop and look closer.

There’s a woman staring back at me. Through a reflection of the sunlight overhead, she has a genuine smile on her face I haven’t seen in years.



## 8

A comforting cushion of air ushers me up the front sidewalk and through my front door. Stanley Turner was as helpful as Hank said he'd be. Not only did he explain the exact steps to resolve my plumbing problem, I also learned a few new things from him about the tools and parts involved in the process. My thoughts wander all over the emotional map, but there's a small part of me that believes I might actually be able to pull this off.

I set my bag of fruit on the counter and place the project supplies next to it. Without thinking, I separate the peaches and lemons into different piles. Each mound before me begs for attention. There's a treasure hidden inside one of them, and I'm asked to choose the right one.

There's the plumbing materials—what I need. On the other end are the lemons—what I want. Then, in the middle, there are those peaches. They don't fall into either category. I neither need nor want them. Is there something else that inhabits the apparent void between those two words, *need* and *want*?

I choose the pile of want in this moment and head toward the front porch. The lavender is overflowing and branching out to fill all available space in the planter. After I moved it from the spot in the side yard where it was struggling, it has flourished with new vigor. As I snip a few sprigs, I wonder whether there are parallels between flowers and life. Does transporting and trimming certain parts make a difference? Does it allow what's left to return stronger and more vibrant than ever?

My fingers massage the velvety texture as I meander into the kitchen. Instinctively, I pull back the curtains, grab my trusty wooden spoon, and prop open the window. I juice the lemons into the pitcher. An occasional seed falls into the mix, requiring retrieval every few twists.

The process is calming. Becoming immersed in something routine distracts my analytic mind. In these moments, I find it easier to contemplate life on a different level. Things get tossed into our path without permission. Fragmented pieces of cork in a glass of wine. Fruit seeds in lemonade. A mother who broke me, in every conceivable definition of the word. Some experiences are simpler to push aside and ignore than others. It doesn't mean they can't all be stowed away in the past where they belong.

But there are some things we desperately wish to bring back into the present. Life is cruel that way, choosing what we're allowed to keep and forced to let go.

I crush the violet herb, rub it between my fingertips, and sprinkle it in the pitcher. Remnants of the essential oils drift through the air with a soothing influence. The sugar and water go in next. I inhale with deliberate intentions and embrace the emotional cleansing process. The citrusy lemon, calming lavender, and intoxicating jasmine permeate my pores. It's akin to a luxurious spa treatment for my delicate heart.

The wriggling stream from the faucet interrupts my blissful moment. It mixes with thoughts of the white flower, so close I can reach out and touch it. An unpleasant thought stirs inside. I open this window each time I enter the room to greet the fragrant trellis outside like an old friend. Now that trusty floral companion hinders me from completing the plumbing repair. It looks as though I'll be able to test my theory again. Will transplanting and trimming back something have the effect I hope for?

Placing the pitcher in the refrigerator to chill, I ease through the front door. I pull my rocking chair to the far end of the porch. It's a small section that wraps around the side. I don't sit here often since it overlooks that field of overgrown weeds. I study the landscape with intensity. Different sizes and shapes mix. It creates something disorganized and . . .

The early-afternoon sunlight dances alongside a tiny chickadee. Mother Nature crafts a small shadowy refuge for him. He alights on the long stem of a weed swaying in the breeze. It's chaotic . . . and beautiful.

I blink once, then twice. Is this real? The visual sensation before my eyes explodes with texture and color. It reaches out and wraps its arms around me in a comforting embrace. Catmint and hollyhocks fill the flowing vision of an English countryside. Sprigs of sage, dill, and thyme line the winding cobblestone pathways. There's an arbor with climbing roses, framed by foxglove and phlox on either side. It's the entrance to a haven of hope. I allow my lingering gaze to drift back toward the centerpiece of it all. A jasmine plant blooms freely and wildly in this surreal garden of love.

I must act now, lest this idyllic image flee my ephemeral memory. Rising from my seat with a sense of purpose, I keep my eyes locked on that expanse of land. My fingers grope for the door handle. When they find it, I dash into the kitchen. I look for anything to capture this vision. I grab the paper bag that once held my fruit, noting that the crease marks from Hank's fierce grip are still present. But they seem to fall in all the right places, where each plant should go. Were these plans predestined, waiting for this moment to bestow themselves upon me? Thoughts of a childhood visit to the library and Ms. Pickett's words

echo in my mind: *The universe provides what you need most, but only when you're ready to receive it.*



THE SHOVEL BLADE WAS dull and a few tines were missing on the rake, but persistence proved successful. After tilling a small part of the land, I transplanted the jasmine to its new home. I'm dirt-laden on the outside but somehow cleaner on the inside. Acting upon this impromptu visual sensation has caused something to shift at my core. It's tipped my life in a direction and to an extreme I've never experienced before.

My elevated mood weakens when I return to the kitchen sink. Scrubbing my hands to remove the layers of fertile soil, I look out the window, forlorn. The space before me is devoid of that immediate presence and intoxicating scent. Only a spirited breeze will carry that distant memory to me now. My thoughts drift upstairs to my bedroom.

Dillon's book remains buried at the bottom of my bureau drawer. I never once thought about him while embarking upon my fulfillment of this vision. Is my remembrance of him already beginning to slip away? It consumes me with guilt and worry. My all-too-human heart tugs at me for attention. Will I be nothing but a fading memory to someone? To anyone?

I pour a glass of lemonade and catch sight of the crumpled paper bag. I'm not an artist, nowhere close to it. But there is inspiration wrapped up in those scribbles of that ethereal dream. It's like they came from something inside and outside me at the same time. As if some creative genius intervened to beget a work of art I never would have been able to construct on my own. I was the channel for some form of beautiful and divine intervention.

The peaches and plumbing supplies still rest on the counter. That void between need and want resurfaces. Maybe there is something between them. Or perhaps it's a mix of the two. Those peaches. The image of Hank and Lydia walking together hand-in-hand. The conversations I've shared with both of them. These thoughts illuminate a path like fleeting firefly flashes on a summer evening. They lead me to discover a place in the shadows I didn't know was there. We each have a need to be wanted and a want to be needed.



I TAKE A SEAT ON THE same rocking chair, staring across at the jasmine plant. It waves back at me in the freshening breeze. A faint trace of its fragrant aroma reminds me it's not that far away. I place my glass of lemonade on the

side table and exchange it for the plumbing coupler I brought outside with me. I'm trying my best to understand all the details of this unfamiliar task before I begin it. I've undertaken nothing this ambitious before. But my self-confidence has rebounded some. Will it be enough?

I trace my finger over the circular opening of the coupler. It's a form of yogic meditation for me. Random words filter through my consciousness. *Infinite. Whole. Timeless.*

Gazing back across the yard, I smile. I've been greeted and helped by a piece of my divine existence to conjure up this joint floral creation. Fixated on it, I notice in my peripheral vision something stirring to my left. Allowing my eyes to relax and accept a wider view, I see a sketchbook. It's the same color as the phlox in my future garden. A hand moves across its pages with crisp strokes of delicate artistry.

I watch Jack work in silence, willingly captive to each of his movements. All his focus is on the front porch. But a sideways glance shifts his gaze every few moments. To the solitary jasmine plant nestled among the overgrown weeds surrounding it. Does it distract him, or is he drawn toward it?

He doesn't notice me. I stay as still as possible so as not to disrupt his concentration. At first I'm hesitant to engage emotionally, but an insatiable sense of curiosity tempts me. Even from this distance, he communicates so much through his eyes. I long to see how he conveys his thoughts and vision through charcoal and lead onto a piece of paper.

Another chickadee lands on the jasmine. Could it be the same one from earlier? Jack's attention is instinctively pulled toward it. His pencil movements stop midstroke. I watch him watching it before I shift my gaze to the small bird. We share the same delightful vision for a moment. Does he see the same things I do? Are the colors and textures as vivid for him as they are for me?

An alarm blares in the way of a ringing phone from inside the house. It pierces the tranquil melody of our afternoon song. The chickadee flies, crossing the direct path between Jack and me. We each follow its flight until our eyes find each other. They lock for what seems like forever. Being seen doesn't bother me, although I suppose it should. I only hope to escape this dizzying whirlwind of spiritual adrenaline. My mind begs me to look away, but I can't.

It's Jack who does so first. He gathers his supplies and flees down the street in a rush. I want to chase after him. I need to stay put. Caught in that void between those two words again, I drift through an emotional wormhole.

I stare into my lap. My finger traces circles around the opening of the copper pipe. I gaze back toward the garden and watch it blossom in my mind's eye again. The vivid color of that phlox matches the cover of Jack's sketchbook.



Complementary but disjoint thoughts filter through my mind. One from the present and another from the past.

The coupler in my hands helps facilitate a transition. Between two things that don't naturally fit together. And the name of that vibrant pink flower derives from the Latin word meaning "flame." Something about this fire burning inside me certainly doesn't fit, but I can't make any sense of it.



## 9

I stare at the copper circle in my hands, continuing to trace my finger around the edge. The shape is both mesmerizing and maddening. No matter where I find myself along its path, everything looks the same. Is this nothing but a hallucination? I've had vivid dreams before, but none so alive as this one. If this experience was only a product of my overactive imagination, does that make it any less real?

I sit there for ten minutes, or hours. I'm not sure which it is. A weird sense of *déjà vu* draws me back into the present. I glance to the left, but a vacant space on that empty sidewalk taunts me. There's no evidence of anyone having sat there. And no proof that a single penetrating gaze has turned my world upside down.

Upon recognizing the familiar ringing from inside, I jump from my seat and fly into the kitchen. "Hello?"

"Claire? I wasn't expecting to reach you. I figured I'd leave another message." So I didn't imagine it all.

"Hi, Russell. I was outside, doing . . ." How *do* I explain what just happened? It might be impossible. "How long ago did you call?"

"Five minutes, ten at the most." It felt so much longer. Time distorts certain moments. It stretches and morphs into something infinite. Like a circle. "You're in the foothills, right? Not at some insanely high altitude?"

"What? Why?"

"You seem . . . quiet. And different. Not in a bad way. It's just, you sound both anxious and calm. I know, it doesn't make any sense." We can agree on that final part. Whatever happened over the past couple minutes runs deeper than the surface. "Are you still doing okay?"

I'm not sure how to respond since I don't have a clue what's happening around me. "I didn't sleep well last night . . . and I might have had a bit too much coffee this morning." That's what it feels like. I suppose it's not a complete lie. I was restless lying in bed. And based upon my present thoughts, I suspect that will be the case this evening too.

"So, you can ignore the message I left earlier. I called to let you know we'll be arriving sometime tomorrow afternoon." I hear my niece pleading for a chance to speak in the background. "And Lizzie would like for you to make

some of that famous lavender lemonade for her. Do you believe she still remembers drinking that in her sippy cup as a toddler when you visited the house?" That was such a long time ago. Things were so different. Russell was happily married. I was gainfully employed. The world was spinning on its axis predictably. Without my ever noticing it, subtle and imperceptible shifts have given rise to a new reality.

"I will be sure to have some waiting for her." With my supply of lemons waning, I'll save what's left in the refrigerator for Lizzie.

"Thanks again, Claire Bear. I owe you."

"It's no problem. I'm happy to help." I could use some help too, but I leave that silent plea in a private place.



A DELUGE OF EMOTIONS overwhelms me. I ease around the corner of the porch, not wanting to disrupt the sanctity of that earlier moment. The vision of my garden, that chickadee, and . . . Jack. I need no external medium to record those thoughts for personal posterity. They're indelibly etched into my heart, an elemental beat to my soul's pulse.

I drag the rocking chair around the corner and place it next to my swing on the front porch. What I would give for a visit from Hank and Lydia right now. My focus returns to the conversation with Russell. Things change so much, and in such a short time.

The herbs in my repurposed flower boxes continue to stretch skyward. They peek over the railing, as if to greet me with encouragement. Anything and everything can grow and bloom when provided with nurturing care.

I look back down, massaging my fingertips. Are my mannerisms born from nervousness? Or a reminiscence of that calming, velvety texture from earlier? The essential oils stay locked inside that lavender—until they're released through a tender but deliberate touch. Rub too soft and the scent remains hidden. Too hard and you damage the buds. Finding the right pressure isn't something you can teach or show. It's intuitive. One needs to experience it to understand the necessary tactile persuasion.

"Excuse me."

A smoothness exists between my fingers even though there's nothing there. The words I hear have that same silky consistency. They must come from the same imaginary place where the plant I'm not holding exists. Some parallel universe where dreams aren't only apparitions. They're real and tangible things you touch and feel.

Is someone clearing his throat? It rattles my mind free from that surreal image. I look up, and there he is, standing at the base of my steps. He holds a paper bag with both hands. A corner of that phlox-colored sketchbook peeks out of a backpack lying on the ground. It's a sign of Jack's hurried attempt to flee the scene. Thoughts somersault in my head.

Why did he leave? Wait, if he left, that means he was there. The experience comes tumbling back into my memory with the force of an unexpected ocean wave. It creates a sense of imbalanced refreshment.

It was real. I didn't imagine it.

What is he doing here now?

"This is my way of apologizing, for intruding on your privacy." He tilts the bag so I can see the gold mine of lemons inside. He answers my question without a need for me to vocalize it. What if there is a parallel universe where people share thoughts differently?

I stop rocking in my chair. My hands become still. Everything stops to establish a balance. My heart's movement counteracts the stillness, beating with anxiety. Jack places a tentative foot on the first step before moving it back onto the walkway. "I didn't realize someone had moved in . . . I promise not to linger near your property anymore. Without your permission." It sounds like a question.

How does he know I enjoy lemons, and where did he get all these? Did Hank receive a new shipment in the past two hours? "Mr. Charles said you're always looking for more of these. I had a few extras from the ones I bought a couple days ago." How does this keep happening? My silent thoughts reach him without a spoken syllable.

"Jack?" The only word I can summon comes out in something resembling a whisper. A shot of adrenaline courses through me as a faint grin emerges on his face. This wildly accelerated feeling makes me think I did have too many cups of coffee this morning. What causes this sensation? Is it his smile or the way those four letters spill from my lips into the space between us?

"And you must be . . . Claire." The sound of his name alone stimulated something invigorating inside, but mixing mine with his in this same sphere creates a bubble of momentary euphoria. Suddenly the English language is foreign to me. I have no words. "The architecture of this farmhouse is alluring. It's so beautiful. Drawing is a form of . . . emotional therapy for me."

He pauses before sharing that final thought, as if unsure whether to divulge a small secret. But it's the adjectives he uses that captivate me. *Alluring* and *beautiful*. Why does his use of them cause a fluttering inside? I feel as though a butterfly has alighted on a branch of my sentimental being.

It was so much easier to watch him from afar. I can't look him in the eyes now, forcing me to focus on something else. The rough stubble on his cheeks shows the slightest hint of gray. Tanned hands suggest a desire to be outdoors. His light brown hair is somewhere between unruly and windblown. It wouldn't work on everyone, but it suits him well.

"I'm sorry again, for disturbing you." Jack sets the paper bag at the base of the steps and stoops down to grab his backpack.

"Can I see them?" The words emerge from an unknown place. He picks up the lemons to show me. "Not them. Your drawings."

Any remnant of a grin fades from his face. Jack's posture, once relaxed, becomes rigid. "They aren't that good." He stares at the fruit. I'm pretty sure he's not talking about them. "And they're a . . . private thing."

Why am I crushed? I shouldn't want to see his sketches that bad. The sound of an opening zipper doesn't mesh with my focus on the yellow citrus.

"I should become more comfortable sharing." My gaze traces back toward Jack. He retrieves his sketchbook and studies it. Why is it that everything he says sounds veiled? And accompanied by that same unsteady sensation?

Jack hands me his sketchbook without climbing the steps. He somehow knows there's a need to respect the space between us.

I study the black pencil marks. There are hard angles and edges to denote the gable on my roof. I look closer. There are subtle curls at the end of each stroke that remain hidden to all but the most discerning eye. I trace my fingers over the drawing, sensing a deep story and emotion. Both in the history of this farmhouse and the man sketching it.

Looking down, I realize I'm on the first step. It's like his artistic creation has drawn me closer to him without my permission. I'm so close I can smell his sandalwood aftershave. It doesn't match his rough exterior, but the fragrance melds with the warmth in his eyes. Even if there is something resembling pain hiding behind them.

The situation is becoming unsettling. I've let my defenses down, and my vulnerability is on full display. Retreating to the top step, I reach out and hand Jack's sketchbook back to him. I'm careful to grip it by the edge. I fear what might happen if I establish any manner of physical contact with him. "Thanks again, for the lemons." *And everything else.*

"Have a pleasant afternoon, Claire." A small smile returns to his face before he leans over to pick up his backpack on the ground. As he moves down the walkway, I'm pulled down the steps after him, a safe distance behind. There's something in that parallel universe tethering us together.

After he's gone, I wander back to the lavender plant. I pull off a few more sprigs and gather the bag of fruit in my left arm. With my right hand, I caress the familiar flowers. It causes images of that garden, the chickadee, and now Jack's sketches to reappear.

A picture is worth a thousand words. At least that many. In this case, it might be more like a million. If only I could rearrange all those words into some meaningful message.



## 10

The knocks reverberate through the house, startling me. It's only the second time someone has approached my front door since I moved to Pigeon Grove. Everyone has respected my unspoken desire for privacy, save for Hank and Lydia. In hindsight, I'm thankful for their gracious welcome to the neighborhood on that first visit. It has led to a delightful friendship.

"Aunt Claire!" The sound of a little girl turned young woman pulls me from the couch with an eager grin and hastened pace. As I approach the door, my smile widens as Lizzie's twinkling eyes shine through the mesh screen.

Russell holds a pink suitcase in his right hand. "Hey, Claire Bear. Great to see you, sis." I greet both on the porch and offer my brother a quick but heartfelt hug. It's been a long time since I've shared a genuine embrace with someone. It feels good.

Lizzie shadows her dad with an even stronger squeeze for me. Her arms used to wrap around my waist. Now they almost reach my shoulders. She latches onto me with affection that's surprising for a teenager. Bending over to place a kiss on the top of her head is a thing of the past as I rise on my tiptoes. "What a beautiful young woman you've become." I run the palm of my hand over her long dirty-blond hair before offering them a tour of the house.

"Can we visit that coffee shop on Main Street? They have all these different roast types." The excitement in her voice supports my presumption that caffeine is a part of her daily routine. "And that bridge coming into town? It looks like it'd be the perfect subject for my next painting. Could we go later?" Her youthful energy is infectious, and I can't help but feel my mood elevate in Lizzie's presence. "And oh, I almost forgot, wait here." She darts back to the car and returns with a cloth bag full of that elusive yellow fruit. "Will you share your secret recipe with me?"

It's ironic that, just twenty-four hours ago, I barely had enough lemons for a single pitcher. Now, between Jack's gift and Lizzie's stash, I might have an ample supply to start my own farm. With the sack thrust into my arms, her smile begs for an answer to the flurry of questions I've already forgotten.

"Maybe we should give your aunt a chance to catch her breath. And remind me to introduce you to the wonders of decaf." Russell winks at me before I open

the screen door again and lead them through the living room area.

“Claire, this is . . . beautiful.” He takes in the view surrounding him with genuine appreciation. I’m glad others also recognize the beauty I saw when first visiting this place. Even before I set foot inside, it spoke to something in my soul.

“Things aren’t quite where I want them to be yet, but it’s coming together.”

“There’s so much space. Do you have any idea how you will use it all?”

I haven’t considered that question. I only know this house was meant to be mine. The quiet undertone in my brother’s voice doesn’t go unnoticed. I pick up on his subtleties, and this one is well-founded. He’s wondering if and how I can afford it. Property is cheaper here, but still, I have no job. I’ve trimmed my expenses to the bare minimum, and I have a hefty savings account. Between that and the imminent sale of our childhood home, it’s not something I need to worry about yet.

“I haven’t thought about it much. But maybe this will encourage a few more visits from my favorite brother and niece.”

“Am I not your only niece?” With folded arms across her chest, she flashes me one of her signature teenage expressions. She makes it clear I won’t pull one like that over on her.

“Well, yes. But I reserve those adjectives for the truly special people in my life.” I wrap my arm around Lizzie and tug her toward me for a mini squeeze. My mind wanders to a different set of adjectives. *Alluring* and *beautiful*.

After a tour through the house, we’ve gathered in my favorite room. Standing at the kitchen table, Russell rests his hand on Lizzie’s shoulder. “Why don’t you go upstairs and unpack while your aunt and I talk?” As she leaves, bouncing around the corner and up the steps, I smile with gratitude. For this place. For these people. “You have no idea how talkative she was the entire drive. She couldn’t wait to get here and see you.”

“Wasn’t she disappointed about not being near the shore?” Mountain life and beach life each have their advantages. But I’ve always thought Lizzie leaned more toward the realm of sand and sun.

“She misses you. As do I.” Am I ready for a conversation this deep after being absent from their lives for so long? It’s been several years. My mind says no, but the heart pleads for permission.

“When do you need to leave?”

“In a few hours. I still have a drive ahead of me, and I should get a good night’s sleep before my meeting in the morning.” I’m not sure now is the best time to dive into these deep emotional topics.



“Would you like something to drink? Lemonade, water, or . . . lemonade?” My refrigerator is less than stocked. I live a simple life with simpler needs.

“I wouldn’t mind some of that world-famous lemonade, if you have any to spare with my little fruit camel upstairs. Maybe I can sneak a glass before she notices I’ve stolen some from her promised stash.” He grins as I grab the cold pitcher and a couple of glasses, and pour two servings. As I close the cupboard, my eyes fall upon the jasmine through the window. It’s waving lazily as if to wish me a good afternoon. I can’t help but whisper a greeting in return.

We move to the living room. I place a glass in front of Russell and take a seat across from him. He takes a sip, holds it up, and stares at it. “This brings back so many memories.”

Such a confusing word, *memories*. By itself, it’s an ambiguous term. Do they represent something good, bad, or otherwise? I’ve had plenty of enjoyable times with my brother. So why is it that all the unpleasant ones float to the surface when we’re together? Is that why I avoid spending more time with him?

“How are you doing?” It’s becoming a frequent question from him. “I know . . . I keep asking.” There’s genuine concern and compassion in his voice. Do I also detect a hint of guilt?

“I’m doing okay.” Pausing for a second, I let more of the truth leak out. “But I’ve been better.” I can’t recall an extended period of positive vibes in my recent past. Every moment over these last couple days has me on edge. Fear consumes me. Everything seems to fall apart once things start going well for me. It’s only a matter of time. I remind myself to hide away for the foreseeable future. It should prevent any of that negativity from infringing upon my world. Then I remember that will be impossible to pull off with Lizzie as my guest. “How’s the business?” Back to safe topics, both of us tiptoeing around the elephant in the room.

“I’m actually quite nervous. I’ve never prepared for anything on this scale before.” He takes another extended sip and stares at his glass. “But I’ve done everything I can.”

“You’ll do great, I’m sure of it. You always persevere.”

“Listen, Claire. About Mom . . .”

“Don’t worry about it.” My response comes quick. “That’s in the past now.” At least that’s where I want it to be. And stay.

“No, this is important, and I’ve wanted to talk about it with you. I just didn’t know how.” He sets his lemonade on the table and wraps his fingers together tightly.

“How can you call her ‘Mom’? That name should be reserved for someone who cares for and nurtures people. Especially her own children.” The bile of

irritability rises in my throat.

“There was a time . . . when it wasn’t so bad. Before you were old enough to remember, while she still had a job. Back then, she took care of us in the only way she knew how. It was never perfect, but it was real.” I have no words. There’s a part of me that doesn’t want to believe any of this. It’s easier to despise her. I don’t have the emotional space or patience to love and hate her in the same breath. “You know that lemonade recipe?”

“Yeah, the one you taught me.”

“Well, before I showed you, she shared it with me.”

How can I stomach another glass of it now? Those sour undertones will surely overpower the sweetness I used to taste. How can my mind mix these two opposing thoughts? Drinking lemonade on the porch while gazing toward an ethereal image of my garden. It’s perfect. And then these caustic memories from the past pollute that beautiful moment.

“I’m sorry.” My gaze darts across the table to Russell. I’ve never heard him use those words before. At least not while talking about this. “I shouldn’t have asked you to handle everything on your own. Truth is, I didn’t even ask. I just assumed you would take care of all the details, and that was wrong.” Our eyes lock, and I notice his pain. I can only imagine he recognizes a similar suffering in me. “When stuff went bad, I wasn’t sure what to do. I feel guilty for not doing more to help you.”

“You were there, and you did help, by getting me to focus on other things. Better things.” He was young too, trying to navigate his way through a sea of doubt and distrust.

“I didn’t come to her funeral because . . .” He stares over my shoulder, contemplating his next words. “Exposing Lizzie to those thoughts of her grandmother wouldn’t have helped. And there’s a part of me that worried about the negative atmosphere. That it might have infiltrated her through some warped form of familial osmosis.”

“It’s okay. I understand.” I don’t completely appreciate his choice, but I’m a lot closer now, and it is the right thing to say. His hunched body posture reveals deep emotional suffering. I need to help him like he did me. Moving from my position on the couch, I walk around the table and embrace Russell in a full hug. He sniffs, fighting back a sob.

“Truth is, Claire, I knew you could handle it. It’s not an excuse, but it is a cowardly reason. I should have been there.” I rub his back, hoping to wipe away some of that unwelcome pain that has risen to the surface. “You are a stronger person than I could ever be.” His words shake something loose inside me.

I hold his shoulders, release him from our embrace, and look him in the eyes. His gaze speaks nothing but unfiltered truth. There's a lightness in my chest.

After running shaking fingers through his hair, Russell gets up and grabs our two glasses. "How about a refill? I don't think she'll notice."

"Why doesn't she already know the secret recipe? About how much lavender to put in the pitcher?" I recall Lizzie's plea for me to share it with her.

"Don't you remember, there is no secret. It's whatever feels right in the moment."

"I know, but why doesn't she know that?"

"I thought it might be best coming from you, whenever the time was right."

As Russell disappears into the kitchen, that right time may be quickly approaching. My thoughts tumble back to his message. *You are a stronger person than I could ever be.* No one has told me that before. I appreciate the power of words, but these carry an extra potency. And coming from the big brother I looked up to as a child, it means even more. Such a simple thought has improved my self-image in the blink of an eye.

He returns with two full glasses and a smile on his face. "It looks like Lizzie has already found her next subject."

"What do you mean?"

"She enjoys working in watercolors and oil paints. It's all mumbo jumbo to me, but she has a knack for it."

"I think your artistic bent has rubbed off on her, just in a different medium." Russell's landscaping efforts are a work of art in a way only flowers can achieve.

"Well, she's sitting on the porch, staring out at a jasmine plant in the middle of a field. Do you know who owns that?" I'm hesitant to offer the truth, unsure where he's heading with his comment. I didn't give much thought to its placement. I wanted nothing more than for it to be front and center through the kitchen window.

"As a matter of fact, I own it."

"Did you plant that there?"

"I did." Should I share the magical vision that greeted me yesterday? "I have plans to turn it into an expansive English cottage garden. Arbors. Walkways. Flowers of all shapes, sizes, and textures." I can't hold it back. Lost in a dreamy state, I let excitement spill from me unfiltered.

"It sounds amazing. I should help you. I do have a bit of experience in that area." I smile, realizing his offer is only hypothetical. He has a critical business meeting first thing in the morning. "Lizzie looks up to you. You know that, right? Even though we don't spend a lot of time together, she knows how strong you are." He leans forward, resting elbows on his knees and tenting fingers over

his mouth. "Can I use your phone?" I nod, pointing to the kitchen, still lost in this new feeling of unfamiliar strength.

I get up, make my way outside, and peek around the corner at Lizzie on the side porch. She's curled up in the rocking chair, with legs tucked beneath her and a palette of watercolors beside her. I glimpse the spiral-bound sketchbook in her lap. She has turned an overgrown field of weeds into a beautiful work of art. With my jasmine as the centerpiece.

"That's absolutely exquisite."

She looks toward me, tucks long strands of hair behind her ears, and smiles. "You have to say that. You're family."

"Perhaps, but that doesn't make it any less true. Your dad is right. You have quite a knack for this stuff."

She returns her focus to the field, eyes moving back and forth between her subject and the sketchbook. Just like someone else I now know. She dips her brush in the red mixture. I watch it transform into a soft pink hue as it seeps into the paper fibers. "It is nice to see something different. There's only so many ways to paint a bowl of oranges."

"Why don't you try painting some new things?"

She wriggles her legs and repositions them beneath her. "Dad's been busy with work. So it's been tough to find the time to, you know, get out and stuff." My heart breaks a little for her. To have a dream, to recognize exactly what you want, and not be able to chase it. I'm all too familiar with that feeling.

"Maybe your Aunt Claire can show you a thing or two around town?" Russell arrives on the side porch, surprising both of us. "I'd love to see that bridge done in oil paints on a canvas."

"Dad. I didn't know you were there. That's not what I meant . . ." It's impossible for her to disguise the guilt and disappointment in her voice.

"It's okay, pumpkin." His tone evokes empathy embedded in an unspoken apology.

"Dad, pumpkins are fat . . . and orange." Leave it to teenagers. They discover ways to refute the most tenderhearted show of parental emotion.

"Well, they still remind me of my little Cinderella." He smiles, and the hint of a grin grows on Lizzie's face, even if she doesn't allow him to see it.

"I'm not so little anymore." She returns to her painting while Russell and I share a knowing smirk.

Lizzie is growing up so fast. And she's got a gift. "Well, if there's one thing that's certainly not little, it's your talent."

"Speaking of underutilized skills, do you have a shovel around these parts? I'm itching for some sacred time in the dirt." My brother flexes his fingers as a

writer would before picking up a pen and paper. He's preparing to tell a story in his own unique way.

I glance at the sun. It has moved more than a few hours across the afternoon sky. "You have to leave in less than thirty minutes."

"Make that twenty-four hours and thirty minutes. I pushed my meeting back."

"But . . ." Does he feel obliged to stay? Did I cause that? It's not the message I wanted to send, and I certainly don't want him to risk losing the contract.

"It's okay. I owe you, and as it turns out, the day after tomorrow works better for my potential client." A mirror image of Lizzie's infectious smile appears on my brother's face. Now I see where she gets it from. "So, who's up for a little time in Mother Nature's sandbox with me?"



PRELIMINARY GRUNT WORK in the late-afternoon sun was surprisingly enjoyable. We cleared a large part of my newfound floral bed and prepped it for new plants. Staring at the ceiling while lying in bed, I'm overwhelmed with gratitude. Russell's offer was so thoughtful, putting his professional opportunity at risk for me. My dreams wander as I drift in and out of a peaceful sleep. I stroll along that cobblestone pathway in the garden. Bees buzz from colorful phlox to the tall foxglove, spreading seeds of love.



AWAKE EARLY THE NEXT morning, I am eager for the feel of more soil beneath my fingernails. After a visit to a nursery in the neighboring town and hours of work, my vision is turning into reality.

Covered in dirt and joyful smiles, we're now gathered around the kitchen table. Russell helped with things I never would have thought worthy of consideration. He planned for the proper spacing and an occasional spot of shade. And he helped place each plant to ensure it got the ideal amount of sun exposure.

His advice, my vision, and Lizzie's determination mixed to create something amazing. It's even better than my original idea. I pour three drinks and glance out the kitchen window. The wider vista is a visual evolution, spreading left and right from my jasmine in the center.



AFTER A QUICK SHOWER and a change of clothes, Russell is packed and ready to go. He's said his good-byes to Lizzie and is standing at the front door, smiling. It's a different smile from when he first arrived. It's fuller and more genuine, coming from a deep well of happiness.

"Thank you. You have no idea how much your visit means to me. I only wish it could be longer." There are no words to express my gratitude for all he's said and done in the short span of a single day. It sounds like hyperbole, but my life has shifted. Again.

"Depending upon how things go, maybe I'll have more time to spend with you and Lizzie on the way back through town." He winks at me, but there's still a hint of nervousness in his eyes.

"Good luck, even though I know you won't need it. If you want any references, have them call me. I'll send them a picture of what you accomplished out there, and you'll be a shoo-in for the position." I gesture toward the beginnings of my garden.

"No offense, but I'm not sure a recommendation from my little sister will help much."

"None taken, but I don't think I'm so little anymore." I am finally growing up.

Russell pushes open the screen door and places his suitcase outside. He pauses, looks deep into my eyes, and embraces me in an enveloping hug. It's bigger and fuller than any we've shared before. When he pulls back, I notice moisture in the corner of his eye. "Love you, Claire Bear."

There's that unsteady sensation again, now in a completely different time and place. "Love you too, Russell Stover."



## 11

**B**ribery is still an effective tactic when attempting to persuade a teenager. The promise of a fully caffeinated beverage from the coffee shop on Main Street awaits my niece. The only condition is for her to help me with the plumbing repair. Lizzie ups the ante as only a determined young woman can, negotiating a visit to the bridge this afternoon. She insists it will be her next masterpiece. I can't deny her an opportunity to pursue something she's so passionate about.

Usually an early riser, I'm surprised by what I see after stumbling into the kitchen midmorning. Lizzie is sitting at the table, drawing a carefully assembled pyramid of lemons in her sketchbook.

"Hey, kiddo. How did you sleep?"

"Good." Her response emerges unconsciously as she focuses on the texture of the zesty skin.

My automatic tendencies kick into gear too. Without looking, I grab the carafe to fill it with water. It feels heavy. It's then I notice a fresh pot of morning inspiration has already been brewed. My favorite mug sits empty next to it, waiting for a pour. Is it the promise of coffee or a visit to the bridge that motivates Lizzie? Based on the cooling cup beside her, I know which one holds the mightier power of persuasion.

She looks toward me as I take a seat at the table. "Are you ready to get started? I have the tools already pulled out on the porch." She gathers up her art supplies and slides the sketchbook with its drying pages alongside the pile of fruit.

"I need my daily cup of liquid enthusiasm first, but I promise we'll visit the bridge later." I guess at the reason for Lizzie's excitement. The spontaneous grin on her face proves my assumption right. "I'm impressed how you're able to capture the texture of those lemons so beautifully. And with only a single color and some water. How do you do that?"

"I don't know. It just happens. I used to spend a lot of time trying to find the perfect mixture for each shade. I took so long that I never finished painting anything. So I started going with the flow and letting things happen. It's more fun that way."

I grin and bite my tongue, not wanting to spoil the innocence of youth. Allowing the currents of life to guide you is okay at certain times. But it's also important to understand with clarity where you're headed. That's what I'm in the middle of trying to figure out. Even if it was an impulsive decision, my presence here in Pigeon Grove is a perfect example. Things have changed since I've arrived, but my new life is a delicate balance of order and spontaneity. "Do you have a favorite color?"

"Orange." She responds without a moment of hesitation.

"Does that have anything to do with the number of oranges you've painted?" It's my attempt at a playful joke, but Lizzie appears contemplative, as if she's never thought about it.

"I don't think so. I've always wanted to paint a sunset. With all those different shades of orange. I'm pretty sure that's where it comes from." She pulls her tray of paints back toward her, studying the mixture of red and yellow hues.

I remember trying to decide on a color for the walls in my bedroom. I never would have chosen the pumpkin-curry shade, but its symbolism tempted me. It represents new ideas, a release of limitations, and the freedom to be yourself. I'm probably overthinking things, but I can see why Lizzie is drawn toward that color.

After sipping the last few drops of coffee, I place my mug on the counter. I slyly retrieve my cheat sheet stowed in the drawer.

"What's that?"

"They're steps that Mr. Turner shared with me. So we know what to do. And in what order we should do them. I've never undertaken anything this ambitious before. So it's a good idea to understand what's supposed to happen before plowing headlong into it." I'm speaking in an adult language that younger ones often tune out.

"My dad says that sometimes it's best to learn how to do something as you're doing it. He might have said it while I was trying to create those perfect shades of paint." I'm surprised by her insightful response. "Maybe this is like that. We'll figure it out. It can't be that tough, right?"

While her exuberance is admirable, I smile and review the directions one last time. "Okay then. Let's get to it." I don't want to spoil her enthusiasm, so I keep repeating the steps in my mind. Committing them to memory, I slip the paper into my pocket. I can take a quick peek, as necessary, when she's not looking. But maybe Lizzie's right, this shouldn't be that tough.

She's already grabbed a shovel and started digging in the marked spot. Jumping on the spade like a pogo stick, she works her way around the area in a



circle. I'm thankful for her youthful energy. My arms and shoulders ache just watching her.

She moves so fast. Distracted by her accelerated pace, I try to catch up mentally, thinking about what we need to do next. Was it loosening the coupling? But there was something else before that, I'm almost positive. Should I check my list? Lizzie's looking right at me, wearing a proud smile. I don't want to dispirit her desire for exploration and discovery in the moment.

I dig through my mental catalog of directions while Lizzie burrows in the dirt. We're both searching for an elusive long-lost treasure. "I found it!" She's as excited to find the copper pipe as a dog is to uncover his buried bone. The wrench is already in her hand and wrapped around the joint, too tightly.

"Here, a little looser than that. If you hold it too tight, you'll crush it. Too light, and it'll spin in place." My thoughts wander toward a similar balance of extremes while rubbing those lavender buds. We're both immersed in the moment, learning together. Our hands work in unison to find the perfect pressure. A steady counterclockwise motion begins.

Glancing up at each other, we both smile with a shared appreciation for figuring things out as a team, and on our own. A slow trickle of water from the joint causes a similar drip of information into my mind. Something isn't right. I don't know what it is. "Hold on a second."

"We're almost there. I can feel it." Lizzie continues to twist the wrench with more excitement. That forgotten step floods my memory. The same thing is about to happen in my side yard.

"The main water valve. Stop. Tighten, tighten!" Short abbreviated commands burst from my mouth. I try to convey an immediate need to change course. She stops for a moment, processes my instructions, and repositions the wrench, but it's too late.

The dribble has now become a steady stream. The pressure builds and finds its desired escape route in the crack we've created. A wild and erratic spray of water shoots in every direction. Aquatic fireworks explode in the yard. I look left and right, trying to remember where I saw the main shutoff valve. We're both completely soaked as Lizzie tries her best to tighten the loosened joint. She's fighting a losing battle, realizes it, and gives in, allowing the unruly waterworks to batter her. Small giggles turn to belly-rupturing laughter.

I glance at her but still feel like a deer caught in the headlights. I'm trying to figure out what to do when the spray spontaneously changes directions. Intent on joining the festivities, dirt mingles with the water, coating us in mud. A small chuckle escapes my lungs when I notice Lizzie shift her gaze to someone behind me.

Jack drops his backpack and notices the pipe wrench in Lizzie's hand. She passes it to him instinctively, with no request to do so. He moves into the watery mix, trying to keep the flooding waters from drenching the yard any further. Then, I remember. I dart toward the back corner of the house, closing the valve as fast as I can turn it.

I've stopped laughing. But more of that belly-rupturing laughter continues around the corner. It's louder now that the sound of gushing water doesn't drown it out. The male counterpart added to the mix troubles me. I need to return to the site, but I don't want to. I'm caught in that familiar void once again.

When I sidle back toward my unintended and temporary swimming pool, the hole in the ground has grown wider. Jack's backpack is sitting on the edge of a large puddle. With all the other things needing my attention, this is the one that feels most immediate. It's as if it contains something of critical importance to me. The small gap between the zipper and its full-stop position causes my heart to skip a beat. Swallowed up by worry and guilt, I place it in a dry spot on the side porch.

Glancing back in their direction, I see the water has soaked through Jack's white shirt and jeans. He isn't one of those chiseled specimens I've encountered in unrealistic romance novels. Still, there's a certainty and physical stability about him. It's authentic, even if my apprehensive self says otherwise.

"Hi, I'm Jack." He reaches out his dirty hand to greet Lizzie.

"I'm Lizzie. Thanks for, um, helping. I guess we needed it."

"Actually, it looked like you had pretty much everything under control." He grins and hands the wrench back to her.

"Thank you, Jack." He turns toward me. The sound of his name, even in a simple expression of gratitude, is enchanting in ways it shouldn't be.

"It's no problem. I'm always happy to help a neighbor." There's an unspoken tension between us. Our words trip over each other. We're like clumsy toddlers trying to find our way around an unfamiliar space. Water continues to drip down his forehead, tracing a path down his cheek. It distracts me from what we should be doing.

"Be right back. I'm going to get something to dry off with." I don't even consider the fact I'm leaving Lizzie with someone I've only known for a short period. But Jack feels like the furthest thing from a stranger. By the time I return with three towels, the two of them are grinning at me.

"All done." Jack hands me the wrench, suggesting the repair is complete.

"See, I told you it wouldn't be that tough." Lizzie giggles in jest as I toss a towel at her with mock aggression. She catches it before it hits her. I'm more careful with the one I hand to Jack.

I dry my face, watching the deluge of water drain into the yard. It's making a path away from the house and back toward the garden. It knows where and how to channel itself in a direction that nurtures growth. Jack keeps glancing around as he continues drying himself. I know what he's looking for.

"I put it on the porch. Would you like something to drink? It's the least I can do to thank you for your help. And to apologize for ruining your clothes." Please let that be the only thing I ruined.

"That would be nice. I've heard about your famous lemonade." Word travels so much faster in a small town. Things draw toward each other in a compelling and invisible way. "Hank hinted at your peculiar preference for lemonade over sweet tea. And your niece told me I need to try it." That hidden thread seems to connect our thoughts.

I return to the side porch with three glasses. Lizzie sits in the rocking chair, and Jack leans against the railing. I take a seat on the table beside my niece. "So, we have something in common? You prefer lemonade too?"

"Actually, I usually drink tea. But I've been encouraged to try some new things lately." My face flushes with embarrassment. My vulnerability has been exposed again after proposing we share a unique bond. "But that doesn't mean we still don't have something in common." He takes a sip, grins, and runs a single finger through his damp hair. Jack's eyes keep peeking toward his backpack on the ground.

"I'm afraid to look inside it. It was sitting in a puddle of water after you came to our rescue."

"It's okay. I've got lots of sketchbooks." I know he's bending the truth. He may have many, but this one holds a special importance to him. I lean over and hand the backpack to him. He pulls out the sketchbook. A small part along the corner is damp with moisture. Jack peeks at the page with my house sketched on it. It appears unblemished, but then I notice a wet spot has moved across the paper. As irony would have it, it's located in the same place on the page where our yard disaster occurred. There's a slight bleeding of the charcoal marks. The hard edges have become blurred. It smooths out the detail into something resembling an abstract painting.

"I'm so sorry." He closes the cover.

"No worries. I was meaning to try a new approach anyway. Perhaps this is the universe's way of telling me it's time." I look over at Lizzie, whose mouth is agape.

"Can I . . . see those? Please?" There's a reverence in her voice. It's another uncharacteristic quality for an adolescent. But my niece is anything but a typical teenager. Jack hands her the sketchbook, with less hesitation than when he first

shared it with me. Is he more comfortable with the idea now? Does he think they're ruined? Or is it something else?

Lizzie turns each page with care. She studies every sketch, genuinely admiring each of his artistic creations. "These are all . . . awesome." She sounds awestruck and amazed, but I sense a hint of dejection. That she's never created anything that good. Or worthy of praise. The customary upturn to her lips has straightened with seriousness.

"That one there is something I drew while sitting atop a mountain in North Carolina. You see that path winding through it?" Jack moves beside her and traces his finger over the meandering line. Lizzie nods. "I imagined all the people on various parts of that trail. I thought about how they might feel."

"Did it help you? To draw it?"

"Sure did. I noticed how the ones halfway through are closer to the finish line. I bet they looked at things differently because of where they were on their path. It reminded me not to compare my middle with someone else's end."

Lizzie closes his sketchbook with tenderness as a small grin returns to her face. Jack flashes a quick glance in my direction, and I offer him a warm smile. It's an unspoken thank-you for his gentle encouragement of a young artist.

"Can we go to that bridge, Aunt Claire?" Wise beyond her years, she picked up on his message. Her resurging enthusiasm warms my heart.

"Do you draw?" There's a genuine interest layered inside Jack's question.

"No, but I paint. Hold on a second." She dashes from her seat, flinging mud everywhere. I say nothing about wiping her feet or keeping the dirt contained. Encouraging her passionate spirit is much more important.

She returns with her sketchbook, in cleaner hands, and shares it with Jack. "Let me wash up first." He makes his way toward the hose, not remembering the water is still turned off.

"No, it's okay. Here." She blocks him and places the paintings before him with a wide smile on her face.

He thumbs through them with care, studying each picture with the same intensity as Lizzie. I'm watching two peers, separated by several decades, establish some deep connection. Art is magic. "This is truly amazing."

"Maybe Jack can come with us, Aunt Claire? To the bridge? He could give me some great pointers." Remaining silent, I'm captivated by the grin on her face. I might be ready to roam around town with my niece, but not with Jack. There are too many unresolved emotions to decipher.

"I should be getting home. I have a bit of laundry to do." He saves me from having to say the inevitable.

“Thank you again, Jack. Anytime you want to draw the house, you’re welcome to camp out across the street.” What was that about unresolved emotions to sort out? I’m surprised by my offer, but I guess it’s the least I can do. Especially since I’m ultimately the one responsible for damaging his sketchbook. “I’ll even have some tea for you, if you’ll share your progress with . . .” What am I doing? It’s time for a full stop on any more words coming from my mouth.

“I’d like to see it too, if you don’t mind.” Lizzie saves me now, her request soft. Jack smiles, picks up his backpack, and reaches out to shake Lizzie’s hand.

“It was a pleasure meeting you, Lizzie. And I’d be happy to share my drawings if you promise to do the same.” He turns toward me and offers his palm, slightly open, fingers spread apart. An accelerated heartbeat thumps against my chest.

My arm stretches out to Jack’s without thought. His smooth and tender touch causes a hiccup in my breath. It’s like he’s drawn out some new emotion from somewhere deep inside me.

“And the same goes for you, Claire.” He winks before offering a small smile. “A pleasant afternoon and evening to you, ladies.” He tips an imaginary cap, walks around the corner of the porch, and disappears. The dizzying hum of life begins to subside. Jack’s words echo in my mind. *And the same goes for you, Claire.* What did he mean? I don’t draw or paint. If he shares his drawings with me, what am I to share with him? And that wink. It was more intense than some kisses I’ve experienced.

“Best. Day. Ever.” Lizzie’s teenage wisdom pulls me back to the side porch.

Time to make good on my promise for a visit to the bridge, but first we need to clean ourselves up. “Hey, how did you wash your hands earlier? The water’s not on yet.”

“I used some left over from my watercolors.”

I remember how quickly she passed the sketchbook to Jack. “You washed yours, but didn’t care if Jack’s were dirty?”

“It was okay with me if they got messed up. I can always paint new ones. I just wanted him to see them as they were when I created them.”

No matter the time or place, every one of us hopes to be seen in the most favorable light. “How about we get cleaned up and I take you to that bridge?”

“Actually, could we do that tomorrow? I want to work on that pile of lemons again.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, Jack gave me some new ideas.”

He's given me some too, none I should share with anyone. "Okay, well, how about that fully caffeinated beverage I promised you? I know they close early on some days, but we can take a short walk and find out." It's ironic. After wanting to stay sequestered in my house, I now have a desire to wander around Pigeon Grove. Its charm has seeped underneath my skin, like that water beneath the soil, helping me to grow.

"Are you kidding? What just happened is way better than any coffee I'll ever drink." Lizzie stares out at the afternoon sun casting a warm glow over our garden. "I guess winging it didn't turn out so bad, huh?"

I hear no hint of sarcasm in Lizzie's comment. It comes from a place of complete sincerity. The balance of my life has just tipped past the predictable norm and into a realm of welcome spontaneity. "I'm glad you're here, Lizzie. And yes, I think today turned out okay."

To be honest, it feels closer to perfect.



## 12

My small-town life in Pigeon Grove continues to unfold with tentative trust. Little lumps of restlessness and anxious energy subside with each passing day. I expect good, looking for and finding the divine magic of ordinary things hidden in plain sight.

My morning routine now includes a quick peek through the front screen door. I search that stretch of pavement across the street, hoping I'll need to brew a pitcher of sweet tea I don't drink. He hasn't been around again since that unforgettable day in the side yard.

I drag my hand slowly over the wooden frame and return to the kitchen. Improved water pressure fills the coffee carafe quicker. It also causes that leak from my faucet to spray with more belligerence. With my recent track record, it might behoove me to call a professional plumber for any indoor work. I can't afford a similar fiasco inside the house, even if I found a silver lining in that fortuitous experience.

My thoughts drift to the faintest gray streak racing through Jack's hair. Does it signify a distinguished character? Or is it evidence of hardship endured throughout his life? There are still confusing pieces to my puzzle, parts that don't belong anywhere. But I'm finally beginning to trust myself again. Maybe for the first time. And the belief that things are working out exactly as they should surrounds me with a glowing warmth.

I sit at the kitchen table with a full mug of hot coffee. Lizzie must still be asleep. The house is silent. Deafeningly so. I allow my mind to wander. It's what I used to enjoy, silence and a few moments alone. Now I long for human interaction. How do things change so fast?

The trip through town with my energetic niece a few days ago continued that trustful shift in my life. It started with a safe visit to the produce shop. I used it as a social barometer for how difficult the expedition might be for me. Being pushed outside my comfort zone is something I've never willingly embraced. Hank, always the insightful one, sensed my anxiety. He provided just the encouragement I needed.

His wife pulled Lizzie aside to help pick out different fruit that would be the subject of her next watercolor creation. We came away with even more peaches.

The deeper skin textures would provide her a fresh challenge, Lydia said. I've contemplated Lizzie's paintings more closely with each new one she creates, becoming lost in my thoughts while doing so. It's as if her artistic gift has helped me get to where I am today.

The visit to Caldwell's Coffee supplied us both with a jolt of caffeine. Lizzie seemed to enjoy the fully caffeinated beverage I promised her. But she reminded me it still fell short of the stimulating effects from our experience with Jack. My need for espresso appears to be waning too, replaced by an increased desire to be around others.

Looking down at my mug of cooling coffee, I see I have yet to take a sip, proving my point. Small touches in the kitchen have begun to fill the empty space with a sense of warmth and belonging. Decorative towels drape over the sink. A ceramic bowl gathers my selection of fruit into a cohesive collection. Place mats with cloth tassels adorn the table. They're all handmade and come from other folks in town.

How can I give back to the community? What could I offer that others would need or want?

It's as if the universe has received my thoughts and offers an idea. Or at least the glint of one. A snapshot in time greets me, like a single frame from a movie. I see people, lots of them, seated around a large dining room table. Cloth doilies rest beneath eclectic china patterns and mismatched flatware.

It mirrors that initial vision of my garden, chaotic . . . and beautiful.

Before I can latch onto the full expanse of what I'm seeing, my attention focuses on a different latch. The side door is unlocked. Have I been that careless to have forgotten about it last night? It's one thing to be comfortable in a neighborhood and quite another to be irresponsible. As I get up to lock it, chastising myself, I see movement on the porch. Lizzie sits outside on the same rocking chair, a sketchbook in her hands.

"Hey, kiddo. Good morning. I thought you were still asleep. What are you up to?"

"I've been up a while. Just painting some." There's an uneasiness that leaks through her voice as she gazes out over the garden. The open page in her lap reveals a beautiful depiction of the bridge we visited several days ago. Her memory is impeccable to capture that much detail from a single visit.

"Would you like some breakfast? I can whip us up some pancakes."

"No, thanks. I had some fruit earlier." There's a quiet struggle nestled between her words, as if she needs some encouragement.

"I'll add blueberries." It does the trick as Lizzie smiles wide.

"We're running low. I'll run into town later and get some more."



I appreciate her offer, but she's supposed to be on vacation. "You don't need to. I can get them too."

"No, I like going. And Mrs. Charles always helps me pick out the best fruit for painting." I find it odd that I haven't seen a single image of said produce in her sketchbook over the past several days. Only the bridge.

Lizzie inhales a stack of pancakes topped with fresh blueberries, then darts upstairs. She returns with the cloth bag we've been using for carrying our purchased fruit. Why it was upstairs, I have no idea. "Be back soon." She pecks me on the cheek and rushes out the front door as if Hank and Lydia will close shop before she arrives.

After cleaning the kitchen, I'm drawn to my favorite outdoor spot. I sit on the side porch, glancing out over the garden. More birds have discovered it, but I still reserve a special place in my heart for that first chickadee. It's only been a few days, but it feels as though this space has matured and grown. In ways that having nothing to do with water and sunlight.

Where do all these avian friends come from, and where do they disappear to at night? Do they have a home, or are they content to move from one place to another? In search of whatever might fulfill them in the moment?

I glance toward the sidewalk, hoping to see Jack. I must have imagined the connection between us. It's a blessing and a curse of mine, seeing things that don't exist. Sometimes it creates pure bliss, and at other times, unbearable agony. I was silly to entertain the thought of something beyond a casual friendship with him. Even if I never voiced that desire to myself, I knew it was there, imploring me to acknowledge it.

I've connected with many people in town, but none of them understand me with the same depth and intensity. Without ever needing to share a single word. Or so I thought that was the case with Jack.

It's at least an hour later when the front screen door opens with a slow creak. "Lizzie? I'm out here."

"Be out in a sec. Just emptying the bag." Her words tumble out with nervous anxiety. I remember what it was like to be a teenager, even if she's not going through the same things I had to endure at her age. Something is on her mind.

She arrives on the side porch, standing with attention as if waiting for me to speak. I tilt my head and tread with caution. "What's up?"

"Nothing." Her response, quick and forced, catches somewhere between discomfort and guilt.

"How are Hank and Lydia?"

"They're good, said to say hi." She bites the inside of her lip. "So, hi. From them."

“You know, I was in your shoes once. Talk to me.” Lizzie’s shoulders release with resignation. I was never great at opening up either. I have an idea. “Do you want to help me add some plants to the garden?”

“Sure, okay.”

We’re removing the top layer of soil, clearing the new space in silence, when Lizzie suddenly asks, “Do you ever miss your mom?” A question emerging from a teenager’s mouth has never surprised me more. She doesn’t know much about my situation, only that there were undisclosed issues.

“Yes.” The word feels impossibly difficult to force from my lungs. It’s not the truth, really. I miss the idea of having a mom, but not the one assigned to me. Although those thoughts shared by Russell rattle inside my memory. *There was a time . . . when it wasn’t so bad.* “How about you?”

She slides the dirt around, as if trying to find a weed, or a seed, hidden in the cool soil. “I want to miss her, if that makes any sense. But I feel guilty. Like I shouldn’t care about someone who left me and my dad.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” I stop and place my dirty hand on her cheek. Sadness and guilt hide behind her brave facade. Gosh, I know how it feels. Hiding emotions that plead for release from the stranglehold put on them.

“It’s okay. I’m okay.” She’s not, and I can tell Lizzie’s trying her best to be strong.

“It’s always okay to feel what’s inside, even if those feelings clash with what others think.”

“I miss her.” It comes out as a whisper, still uncertain whether she should share her words aloud.

“Come here, sweetheart.” I sit down beside her and cradle Lizzie in my arms. She’s a tiny seed, already blooming, but doing her best to reach in new directions. Trying to find her way toward the sunlight. I run my palm over her hair with gentle and comforting strokes. “The past is tough to handle sometimes. It’s a piece of our path that has led us to where we are today.” She nods knowingly. “It’s important to recognize how far it’s allowed us to come. But it’s also there as encouragement to keep moving forward.”

The irony is not lost on me, how guidance given to another ends up being the best advice for ourselves. I ponder thoughts of Dillon, my mom, and Jack. Although it’s sometimes confusing and difficult to untangle, they’re all interconnected.

“Thanks, Aunt Claire. I love you.” Her words are stronger and more certain.

“I love you too, Lizzie.” I pause, allowing her to absorb the emotion in my words. “The foundation of every relationship, even with yourself, is trust. Talk to your dad. He’ll understand.” I know he will.

I release her from my embrace and give her space to breathe in the life surrounding her. We put our hands back into the dirt together. I allow my fingers to run through the deep, cool soil alongside Lizzie's. There's a connectedness with the past that, once painful, is now cathartic. Removing that top layer of soil allows me to dig deeper and make room to lay new roots. I hope it does the same for the young and beautiful flower blooming beside me.



AFTER A CHICKEN NOODLE casserole for dinner, I pull a blackberry cobbler from the oven. Where did I put that trivet after the peach tart debacle? Searching high and low, I find it in the final drawer, the one I rarely use.

The cast-iron trivet is there, but it's the object beneath it that dumbfounds me. A sudden flush of heat coursing through me needs to be diffused in a manner that no hot pad can accomplish. The waterlogged corner has dried up and shriveled. The vibrant phlox-colored cover has faded. How could Jack's sketchbook possibly find its way into my kitchen drawer?

I pull it out, turn toward the table, and watch Lizzie stop chewing midbite. She swallows her food along with the lump in her throat. "I'm sorry."

Nothing makes sense until I hear her words. It's then that all the dots connect in my mind. Lizzie's desire to run errands. Jack's absence from across the street. Her lack of focus on the fruit she's meant to be painting. And the incredible progress she has made on the bridge.

"He gave it to me. I didn't take it from him. Just so you know. He said I could use it as inspiration." I never dreamed she would have stolen Jack's property. But I hear guilt of a different type seeping through her words.

Why didn't she ask me? Why did she feel the need to hide it? Does she think I would have said no? Would I have said no? I'm not sure now.

The trust I spoke of, the one all relationships are built upon, feels violated.

I finally get to see Jack again, even if I no longer look forward to it. Someone needs to give him back his sketchbook, and it won't be Lizzie.

His magnetism drew me toward him in unsuspecting ways, but my intuition was right. Something inside me kept pushing him away, to a safe distance. I really know nothing about him. What was I thinking, allowing his subtle charm to seduce me?

For my niece to hide secret meetings like this from me, however innocent they are, is one thing. But for him to do so as a grown man is unacceptable. It violates that elemental trust, breaking a fragile piece of me that had just begun to heal.



## 13

**B**efore falling asleep, I lie in bed and listen to the steady drizzle of rain on my roof. I'm sure it's Mother Nature's attempt to comfort me, but it isn't working. At least my closed eyes keep the tears from leaking out. I don't even know which feelings are trapped inside my emotional downpour. Disappointment. Anger. Betrayal. Confusion. Loss.

That last word sums it up. As innocent as this situation might appear to other people, it runs deep for me. Every time I bare my vulnerability, *this* happens. It doesn't matter if it's with family, friends, or . . . others. I always seem to lose in the end.



I WAKE TO THE SONG of cheerful birds. A ray of sunshine peeks through my window. The tireless attempt at inducing a good mood still isn't working. I fling the covers off with determination, gearing myself up for the task ahead of me. Lizzie timed her midmorning trips to coincide with optimal lighting conditions. Based on the current position of the sun, it's time to go.

I haven't talked about the situation with her yet, and I will, but there are more important things to tackle first. Returning Jack's sketchbook is the main purpose of my visit, but there's more to it than that. He needs to be supplied with a healthy dose of what it means to be the adult when interacting with teenagers.

I could drive but walk instead. Should I rile myself up or calm myself down? I'm not sure which would be more helpful. Focused on my thoughts, I don't notice the friendly greetings from others until they're past me. I rehearse the questions hissing inside my head.

*Why didn't you tell me?*

*What were you thinking?*

*What else are you hiding?*

*Did I imagine . . . everything?*

Strike that last one. My personal feelings will not cloud the purpose of this undertaking. I'm an adult, responsible for Lizzie's whereabouts and safety. I

should have been more careful and aware of what was happening around me. After letting my guard down, I am as angry with myself as I am with Jack.

All my questions are rhetorical. I don't expect answers. I only want to read the look of surprise on his face when he sees me. It's my way of knowing whether any part of this perceived connection was ever real.

I arrive at the bridge before realizing it. He's not here. Does he know? Is he now trying to avoid me? He can't and won't. I recall the perspective Lizzie was painting. Looking up at the stone structure with midmorning sunlight peeking through the trees. I know where I need to go. The small footpath running along the side carves a trail downhill, to the stream babbling below. I step tentatively around the roots and rocks that keep me from doing what I need to do.

He's sitting on a tree stump, knees pulled toward him with a new sketchbook in his lap, drawing something from memory.

*Focus, Claire. These are the thoughts that got you into this situation to begin with.*

I slide my shoes along the pathway, allowing the shuffle of dirt to announce my presence. He grins, never looking up from his sketch. "Did you bring me more of those delicious peaches?"

So that's where they've been going. "No, but I brought something else you seem to have misplaced."

Jack closes his sketchbook, as if concealing more. Hasn't he hidden enough already? The look on his face says everything, revealing that he's been found out. I'm not sure if it's better or worse this way. If he attempted to handle the situation casually, I could rationalize naïveté on his part. But the fact he looks guilt-ridden? He understands what he has done, the trust he has violated.

"Why?" Of all the questions I've thought about and rehearsed, this is the single syllable that emerges. And all the emotions that have been fighting for control over me? The one I least expect to win traces a path down my cheek. Sadness.

"Claire, I can explain."

Those are his first words? Not *I'm sorry*? All he wants to do is justify his misguided choice. "I'm not sure I want you to explain anything. I just came to give this back to you."

For my entire childhood, I lived in fear. Never knowing what might happen next, I was always darting looks over my shoulder. I am grateful Lizzie has not been subjected to growing up in that type of caustic atmosphere. Still, I can't shake those traumatic memories from my mind when situations like this arise. I took for granted that I knew what she was doing and where she was going. It was only supposed to involve a walk down the sidewalk and back. What if she

found herself in danger? What if something went wrong? How could I allow myself to become so sidetracked with my personal emotions and issues? I failed to look after the teenager left in my care.

I thrust the sketchbook at Jack, as if touching it for any longer will send a crippling electric shock through me. A peculiar energy and sense of courage emerge after releasing my grip on it. My decision to let go has freed me from his beguiling influence.

“How could you do this?” The words spew from my mouth with conviction. While that final word, *this*, pertains to this particular incident, it runs much deeper, and he knows it. “I thought . . .”

*No, don't go there.* “I'm responsible for Lizzie. I'm the adult, not her.” How could I allow the innocent charm of small-town life to cloud my judgment?

“How did you think this was okay, hiding this from me? Why did you feel the need to?” He's staring directly at me, eyes connected with mine, trying his best to see what's inside me. “Are you going to say something? Anything?”

“I . . .” Another shuffle behind us comes at the most inopportune time. It's probably a fisherman looking to snag a catfish for dinner tonight. The footsteps stop moving, and all I hear is the stream gurgling past. If only I could toss all these confusing emotions into the water and allow the current to carry them far away.

Jack looks over my shoulder, to the place where the stranger waits to pass. “Hi, Hank.”

Hank? I turn around to find an equally guilty look on his face, along with a bag of peaches in his hand. “What are you doing here?” If my feelings are a jumbled mess, my understanding of what's happening is even more confusing.

“I guess Lizzie's not coming today.” I can't tell whether it's a statement or question.

“That would be a safe assumption.”

“It was Lydia's idea. Sort of.” *Please, someone give me the strength to understand these cryptic words.* I cross my arms and stand waiting. My posture and silence let both of them know I want an explanation. Now.

“Lydia kept looking for new things that Lizzie might want to paint. But I could tell her heart was being pulled elsewhere.” He shifts the bag of peaches to his other hand. “When Jack arrived in my shop at the same time Lizzie was there, we . . . I had an idea. We meant to include you, but . . . well . . . we didn't.”

So Hank is as much to blame as Jack? This situation has moved from bad to worse. Someone I thought was a trustworthy friend has gone behind my back. For something I probably would have allowed after a proper discussion.

“Claire, I'm sorry.” At least Hank has the courage to say those words.

I glare at Jack, wondering if he'll follow suit. When he doesn't, I redirect my focus to Hank. "I trusted you." I know there's hurt in my voice, vulnerability exposed again. I can't stop it this time. Flashing another quick glance at Jack, I notice genuine regret in his eyes. "And I wanted to trust you."

I won't remain here any longer. I climb the uphill path toward a town that now feels less like home.

"Claire, wait." I pause for a short second, contemplating the urgency in Jack's words. With determination, I march forward, never turning around. I'm done *waiting* for things to go right for me.



## 14

I understand Lizzie is not innocent in this lapse of judgment. But she's still a young girl with a malleable mind. How do I broach this conversation with her—especially after the talk we had about her mom and mine?

I'm not her mother, nor her parental guardian. But if she looks up to me as Russell says, I need to say and do something. And I sure don't want to mess it up like everything else in my life.

I walk more slowly back home. That final word creates a bitter taste in my mouth. *Home*. I chew on it and contemplate spitting it out, but I can't. Not yet. Does the universe ever stop making things so difficult?



I FIND HER WHERE I knew she'd be, sitting in the same rocking chair. We're more alike than we are different, even if separated by twenty-five years. She doesn't see me, and it's surprising that she's touching up a painting of the garden. When has she been working on that?

The sight of her work creates a momentary glimpse at contentedness. I try to exhale some of my negativity. When Lizzie notices I'm watching her, she hurriedly closes her sketchbook. Why is everyone so intent on hiding things from me?

I run my palm over the side railing and lean against it. The reflection of my garden in the kitchen window catches my eye. It supplies me with some gentle motivation. "We should talk."

"I know." The way she speaks, it reminds me how mature she is for her age.

"What happened?" It's an open-ended question, a chance for Lizzie to approach it from whatever angle works best for her. She's silent, staring off into the distance. I realize she can't possibly read the flurry of thoughts racing through my mind, so I try something different. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't know how." She grips her brush tighter, as if unwilling to let go of some intangible thing. "Whenever I asked my dad to go somewhere new, he promised we'd find the time. But we never did. He was always too busy with work. So I stopped asking."



A deep inhalation is followed by a sigh filled with frustration. I sense her painful disappointment. "When someone else offered to do that for me? And have the chance to get tips from Jack? He's so talented . . . I couldn't say no." Lizzie glances over at me, and I see the guilt in her eyes. "Well, I didn't say no. I'm sorry. It was wrong."

I appreciate her honesty, but she hasn't answered the burning question inside. "But why didn't you just ask me? I would've said it was okay." I fib a little. Knowing what I do now, I'm not sure I would have been comfortable allowing it.

"I noticed something between you and Jack that day." *That day.* Yes, there was something, and I guess it was plain for everyone to see. "I didn't want to make you any more uncomfortable." What did she observe happening between Jack and me? While I felt a strong connection, did she sense nervous tension? "That, and I was afraid you'd say no."

Lizzie's more grown up than I was at her age, providing the complete truth. Even when she could hide behind someone else's bad choices.

"It's not Jack's fault." Her words attempt to defend his actions. I need to put a stop to that mistruth.

"Actually, he is as much to blame as anyone. Hank too."

"They told me to share it with you, but I never did." That bitter taste in my mouth becomes a little less sour. Still, they should have been up front with me.

"I realize we don't spend a lot of time together, but you can talk to me. You know that, right?"

She nods her head in agreement, looking down at her lap. "I just wanted to be strong and independent." She pauses for a second, glances at me, then stares out toward the garden. "Like you."

If only she could understand the truth. Life is hard and confusing. Is this what it means to be strong? To do what you know in your heart is true, even when it goes against what everyone else believes is the right thing to do?

It would be hypocritical to tell Lizzie otherwise. I would have made the exact same choice. It's also what Hank, and even Jack, has done. Nurturing a young artist who needs to prove something to herself. Even when it goes against what I believe. Or might believe.

Their choice still borders on misguided. But I can see where their hearts and intentions pointed. And that look in Jack's eyes? How he stayed locked with my emotional glare, even through the gut-wrenching turmoil of it? Even now, part of me wants to hope there is something there.

"He shared other things with me too. It's why I had that talk with you out in the garden the other day." I glance over at Lizzie as she allows a feeble smile to

spread across her face. “Jack told me that as important as art might be to my life, connections with other people are even more important.”

Carried through the voice of my teenage niece, his words still cause a tingling sensation. Through every part of my being. The physical, emotional, and spiritual. There’s definitely something there. For me. I just don’t know whether my words do the same thing for him. But I must find out, and soon.



## 15

I can't rightfully take credit for the brilliance of her idea.

Such is the innocent beauty of a young mind, encouraging risk in the face of fear. Even when the likelihood of a disappointing failure is high.

Lizzie helped me gather all the ingredients from local sources. The eggs originated from Feldman's Farm on the outskirts of Pigeon Grove. Princess Layah is the hen extraordinaire. She earned the name thanks to her fancy-pants gait unlike any other in the brood. But with the quality of each egg she produces, I can't fault her pretentious nature. They are that good. Knowing and sharing little tidbits like this? It transforms a small town into a close-knit community.

All the vegetables came from Hank and Lydia. I insisted on paying for them, but neither one would take my money. They said it was their contribution to the neighborhood brunch. It's another perfect example of simple kindness leading to bountiful warmth. I got fresh coffee beans from Caldwell's, even though I no longer have a need for its caffeinating effects.

This is the first time I have allowed people other than family into my home. It is scary, but it feels right. I'm appreciating how those two conflicting emotions nurture each other. Those things that frighten you the most are often the ones you're meant to pursue. Chatty neighbors and hearty laughter replace the silent echoes of creaking floorboards. Yes, this is right.

There are tomatoes, onions, and spinach in the omelets. The smell of sautéed vegetables mixes with fluffy eggs and cheerful conversation. It delivers a moment of sensory bliss. I glance around at everyone mingling and breathe in the ambiance.

Jack holds a glass of lemonade while sharing some flowing hand gestures with Hank. I understand why his art is so compelling. There is a magnetic quality to his every movement, even when he's doing nothing more than engaging in a casual chat. I chastised myself for falling victim to his charm, but my opinion on that matter has changed. Life is short, and experiences like this don't arrive often. It's our duty as human beings to recognize and live those special moments to the fullest.

My talk with Lizzie encouraged a different vegetable on today's menu. An intangible one. The olive branch extended to Hank, Lydia, and Jack offers my

heartfelt apology. For being far too judgmental.

Speaking of my niece, it's her final day in Pigeon Grove. Despite all the joy and happiness surrounding me, I'm saddened by her imminent departure. This has been an extraordinary and sensational week. One that never would have come to pass in this remarkable way without her presence.

The knock on my front door, once intimidating and frightful, is welcome music to my ears. Especially when I see who's standing on the other side of the mesh screen. "Russell Stover. How's the sweetest brother in the world?"

"Hey, Claire Bear." I can tell he notices the new glow surrounding me. A meandering and cathartic path has led me to this moment, but I'm a different person than I was one short week ago.

"So?" I need not say any more. We have a sibling bond that never disappears, no matter what. A beaming smile stretches wide across his face. I know the answer to my question before he shares another word.

"I got it." Relief, exhaustion, and exhilaration seep between his words. There it is again. Conflicting emotions come together with amazing cohesion when we allow them to.

"I'm so proud of you." To see someone work so hard toward a dream and have it fulfilled is inspiring and motivating. To have it be your own brother makes it that much better.

"The same goes for you." He wasn't here, but I can tell Russell understands the depth of what transpired over the past seven days. There's that unspoken sibling connection again.

"Dad!" Bouncing into the room, Lizzie jumps into her dad's open arms. Their hug communicates more emotion than any words could ever summon, even if it's short-lived. "Wait here." She bolts up the stairs and back down again a moment later, before I can share a single word with Russell. "I made it for you." She hands him her sketchbook.

He glances at his budding artistic prodigy and smiles before opening the front cover. The bridge is complete. Both the painting and that invisible connection between father and daughter. It's amazing how art connects people in ways that nothing else can. Personal experience has taught me that, and now I am witnessing it firsthand.

"Lizzie, this is breathtakingly exquisite." He gazes back and forth between her and the luminous watercolors. His proud smile widens with each glance.

"I know you said you'd like to see it as an oil painting, but . . ."

"No, this is better. Perfect." As Lizzie's glow radiates from the deepest part of herself, this is perfect. *Thank you, Hank. And Jack.*

I usher them toward the dining room table. “Let’s head inside, you must be famished. And even if you’re not, I’d love for you to meet some of my friends.”

With warmth, Pigeon Grove welcomes Russell as an extended member of the community. There’s an enchantment to the moment when he takes his seat among everyone else. I stand at the entrance to the kitchen, slightly removed from the center of it all, and smile. Human connections occur across the table in every direction. It warms my heart.

That sparkle of an idea from earlier in the week returns with intense clarity. The vision of people seated around a large dining room table takes on a more visceral quality. Small pockets of emptiness surrounding me fill with something resembling a golden touch. The beauty spreads in a wave of vibrant color.

Bubbly conversation mixes with inspired musings. How might I use the five bedrooms upstairs? I flutter my eyelashes twice, to make sure what I’m seeing is real. The painting on the wall, of a colorful sky along the shoreline, transfixes me. After a third blink, it disappears. But nothing can convince me it wasn’t there a moment ago.

The conversations around me nurture my thoughts. A stunningly beautiful and therapeutic garden. Delicious culinary creations. My warm and inviting hospitality. It all propels me toward an adventurous idea. It’s the furthest thing I could have imagined when first arriving in Pigeon Grove on that rainy morning.

But that’s how the best things come about, when they’re least expected.

There’s an open spot for me at the table, but I’m not hungry. My appetite has been satisfied by something else. The need and want to start anew. Again.



## 16

The crowd thins as our neighborhood gathering draws to an unwanted end. While some guests arrived with a handshake, none leave without a hug. Warmth spreads as everyone moves through the front door and back toward their own home. People are moving apart in a literal sense. But there's a sense of coming together that is undeniably stronger.

Russell and Lizzie are upstairs packing up the last of her things. Jack is the only visitor remaining. He stands outside on the porch, hands crossed and hanging below his waist. Although there's no discernable noise in the house, it is far from silent.

"Would you mind if I sit down? I'd like to say good-bye before Lizzie leaves." My sixth or seventh sense speaks to me. These two artistic souls have nurtured each other in a symbiotic way. Like bumblebees and flowering plants, they work together in harmony. It is extraordinary, the inspiration and enchantment created in the process. Not only for them, but for every life they touch.

"Sure." I feel we could somehow keep this conversation going without another spoken syllable. But there are three words I need to say. "I'm sorry, Jack."

The look of surprise on his face stuns me. "Claire, those are words I should be saying, not you."

Perhaps we both own rights to them in this case. But I don't want to get pulled under the influence of trivialities that steal from the silent magic of this moment. "I know you were only trying to do the right thing, for Lizzie." He remains quiet, allowing a closed-lip smile to emerge. Tension releases from his shoulders, and it's all the encouragement I need. "I'd like for you to finish that sketch of the house." I have both oars in the water, battling the emotional waves that try to catapult me from the boat I'm paddling. "Please. For me."

I don't want it to come across sounding too desperate. Gosh, I hope it isn't. Even if nothing ever comes of whatever this is between Jack and me, I need this. To see his visual inspiration and lock it in my memory forever more.

He rises to his feet, and I feel Jack's desire to reach out and . . . what? Shake my hand? Caress my cheek? Hold me? "That would make me happier than you

know.” Like tango dancers, we’re moving in unison to the beat of music only we hear.

The trundle of footsteps down the stairs is slow and deliberate. My niece slides through the front door, a disappointed look etched on her furrowed brow. Her eyes brighten at the sight of Jack, who focuses all his attention on the budding artist. “Hey, Lizzie. I just wanted to say good-bye. Or, hopefully, see you later.”

She wraps her arms around him in a full hug, surprising everyone. “Thank you, for everything.”

“And the same goes for you, young lady. You’re truly an inspiration. Keep painting, okay?”

She nods her head vigorously. The smile on her face grows wider and more colorful than the expanse of my blossoming garden.

Russell leans over and whispers in my ear. “We talked upstairs. Thank you, Claire.” He wraps me in a hug. That feeling of bringing two people back together again is beyond satisfying. It fills my cup and overflows it with blissful joy.

“I love you, Russell.”

“Love you too, Claire.”

There’s no need for childhood nicknames. Not now. Love like this is simple. And real. “Stay in touch. And visit more often. My door is always open.” The words coming from my mouth might have surprised me in the past. Today, they flow with the same carefree assurance of that stream’s current.

“We will.” My brother chuckles. There’s a certainty in his response as he glances over at Lizzie. “I know this because she’s already picked out her next painting subject. Something having to do with a produce shop on Main Street.”

We separate and prepare for the inevitable departure that no one wants to happen. But it must. Russell has a new corporate landscape project to envision. And an artistic daughter to dote upon like I know he will.

Before I realize it, Russell’s car horn honks. The driver and passenger are both waving their hands outside the window. Calls of *see you soon* are no longer lip service. We mean them, and I already look forward to our next visit together.

I peek back toward the man still standing on my front porch. Jack holds a watercolor painting. It showcases a pyramid of lemons stacked with careful exactness. They’re situated on my kitchen table, which has been an important cog in my emotional transformation over the past week. The thoughts, conversations, and decisions made in that room? It only adds certainty to my belief. It’s my favorite place in the house. In my home.

“She gave you that?”

“She did.” His response rests somewhere between surprise and assertion. Why did Lizzie choose that one? “She said I should continue trying some new things.” I should’ve known he’d read my thoughts.

A warm smile spreads, inside and out, that speaks with more depth than any word or thought. I know what’s coming. My heartbeat skips, and my unsteady breathing quickens. It’s a spontaneous and instinctive response to keep my world from spinning out of control. But I want it to continue pirouetting as it is with a sense of reckless abandon.

I close my eyes and drown in the delicate pressure of his lips against mine. It’s strong and certain. But also tender and unsteady. I continue sinking into each emotion and every sensation that harmonizes with it.

When Jack steps back after a moment of pure bliss that I wish could go on forever, I want to scream, *Please, don’t go.*

But I have no words. He’s stolen my breath, and maybe more.





## 17

The next several days pass in a blur of beautiful serendipity.

The pitcher of brewed sweet tea remains chilled in the refrigerator. Jack prefers my lavender lemonade after giving his palate time to adjust. Unfamiliar but delightful experiences bloom everywhere around me. Afternoon rain showers have nourished the soil and flowers in my garden. They tangle with each other in an act of beautiful chaos. One entity becoming intertwined with the essence of another.

At the end of each day, we sit on the porch swing and watch raindrops tumble off the roof. They drop into the flower boxes waiting to soak up the natural nourishment. I offer Jack a taste of different baked goods I dreamed up in the kitchen. The peach tart holds a special place in my heart, and it came out perfectly on my most recent attempt.

We exist in our own little cocoon, wrapping ourselves in the mystique of a splendid aura. It encompasses nothing in particular, and everything at the same time. A graceful dance occurs between us as my metaphorical wings continue to unfold.

He sketches from across the street while I sit on the porch and watch him. Jack glances up every so often and offers me a smile. I return one without realizing it. We're separated during these moments, but only in a spatial sense. Connection runs so much deeper than physical touch.

We haven't talked about the kiss, and that's okay. Some things don't need words to disturb what's already there.

The wild idea in my head gains momentum with each passing moment. And the afternoons spent with Jack? Watching those charcoal lines swirl into an emotional personification of my home? It nurtures deep-seated feelings I never thought I'd experience again.



I KNOW HE'LL FINISH today, and that scares me. This inanimate structure I live inside has nurtured our time together. An undeniable connection grows

stronger with each passing moment. I'm convinced these walls are alive and breathe life into the space between us.

Our shared artistic journey has been dreamlike. I don't want it to end. He must have something else to draw or paint. Or at least pretend to, for the sake of continuing this magical fairy tale. These quiet moments on the porch, watching Jack, have guided me back toward a time long ago. To ponder and deal with my messy parts in a healthier way. He has no idea that by just being there across the street, he's helping me.

How do I share that with him? Should I? There is so much that could go wrong if I divulge the details of my past. But the comment shared with Lizzie echoes in my mind. *The foundation of every relationship, even with yourself, is trust.*

Jack gathers his supplies, tucks them in his backpack, and makes his way toward me on the front porch. The afternoon cumulus clouds roll in from the west. They provide a softer backdrop for the space surrounding us. I have a peach tart and two glasses of lavender lemonade waiting when he arrives beside me.

My pulse quickens as I prepare to do the most courageous and vulnerable thing I've ever done. I am about to risk losing everything that is good in my life at this moment. He sits down on the porch swing next to me. "A penny for your thoughts?"

His penetrating gaze sees through me. I should know he already senses my emotional unrest. "It might be closer to a dime."

"I'm right here." Yes, he is. And that's how I would like it to stay. Still, I push forward, relying on that elusive and invisible thing called trust.

"My mother abused me." It slips out in slurred speech. If I don't say it quickly, it will never come out. "I've never dealt with it well, and it's kept me from . . ."

Jack places a hand on my thigh, with a most reassuring touch. I feel his thoughts. *It's okay. Everything will be okay.* I want to share that I fear losing someone again, like I did Dillon, but that would be presumptuous.

His thumb makes tiny circles on my jean shorts as visions of that copper pipe return to my mind. Those same random words alight on my heart. *Infinite. Whole. Timeless.* Another one is about to emerge, its warmth spreading, when Jack stops and looks directly at me. "Everyone has a troubled past to deal with. It's not what happened, but how we respond to it that defines us." I study Jack's eyes and feel his anguish. Layers of trauma are trapped between his words. "Her name was Teresa."

He stares at the ground and exhales, lost in a tangle of painful memories. “I was married to my work instead of the woman I was supposed to wed. We got into an argument one evening, and she left the house. Upset and angry.”

He takes a deep breath, removes his hand from my thigh, and interlocks it with the other in his lap. I set the swing in motion, ever so gently. It’s my way of communicating the same message. *It’s okay. I’m right here.* “Instead of going after her, I continued focusing on my work. A stupid painting.”

I sense the emotional instability in his quivering voice. “She didn’t come back. I assumed she wanted some space. Police found her car in a ditch two towns away the next morning. There was a suitcase in the trunk. Not that it matters, and it’s selfish, but I’ll never know if she needed time to herself or was leaving me for good.”

I want to pull him toward me, but I’m not sure where we are right now. I have no words, so I borrow his. “It’s not what happened, but how we respond to it that defines us.”

He pauses for a moment, catches an unsteady breath, and reaches for his backpack lying on the ground. He pulls out the completed sketch of my house and hands it to me.

“Jack, this is breathtakingly exquisite.” It escapes from my lungs, soft and tender. They’re the same words Russell used to describe Lizzie’s painting. I can’t help but feel there’s a connection between the two.

“Since my fiancée died, I’ve felt compelled to work in black and white. My life has become nothing more than varied shades of gray.” He reaches back into his backpack and pulls out a small canvas, placing it cautiously in my hands.

I begin to sob uncontrollably, overwhelmed by the likeness of my garden in its full splendor. Everything I’ve ever dreamed it could be is captured by Jack’s delicate brushstrokes. The colors and textures of the oil painting touch something at my core.

“Claire, you are the first person who has brought color back into my life.”  
I’m home. Right here, right now. In this moment, I am home.



## 18

Without thinking or deciding, our hands find each other. There's a natural chemistry between Jack and me that the rest of the world has yet to discover. Seated on the porch swing, we sway gently, moving in unison like two planets with a shared orbit. The force and attraction are unmistakable. Certain.

I never want the feeling in this singular moment to end, and I anticipate Jack feels the same thing.

I gaze at his creations beside each other. The charcoal sketch dwarfs the smaller canvas painting. But the intimate mood and depth in the latter sings poetry that only my soul understands. His too.

"They belong together." I speak in veiled terms, even though I don't need to. Everything about this afternoon should coexist in soulful harmony. Including us.

"You're right." Jack tilts sideways, viewing both works of art from a different perspective. His head is almost resting on my shoulder. His scent at this moment, after a full day in the sun, is rough and masculine. But it is more enticing than the coveted and delicate jasmine in my garden.

"Have you thought about a name for it?"

He studies the mixed-media pairing with a pensive gaze. The sleek sheen of oil paints complements the edgy shadows created by the charcoal lines. To others, they might appear too divergent. To me, they are exactly as they should be. Jack's meditative study of his artistic creation sparks a growing smile on his face. "*Fly Away Home*."

He says it with such certainty, as if there is no other name. Jack squeezes my hand and begins those tender circular motions with his thumb. His touch is soothing electricity. "I fled what I thought would be my home, looking to run away from the past. But it was only when I decided to do so that I found my home." He stops and looks into my eyes. "Not in a place, but a community . . . and perhaps a single person."

His other hand caresses my cheek. With the gentlest pressure, Jack tilts my face. I'm off-kilter and balanced at the same time. He pulls my lips toward his with an emotional certainty that no force of nature can stop. It's the most tender, compassionate, and loving connection I've ever known.

The same word keeps alighting on my malleable heart. *Home*.

“I want you to have these.” He places the sketch and canvas before me, placing my hand on top of them. Jack wraps his fingers around mine. Our interlocked hands create the consummate work of art. One that has nothing to do with paint colors, pencil marks, or brushstrokes. It has a texture unto itself.

I hoped for this offer, but I never expected it. These breathing creations are part of his heart and soul. “When I asked you to share them with me, I just meant . . .”

“I know. But they belong here.” So many things do. I understand what he’s saying. There are layers to his message, like those paint colors on his splendid depiction of my garden. I start crying, reminding myself that tears can also be joyful. It’s been so long.

Jack smooths away my teardrops with his soft touch. The pitter-patter of raindrops from above join us in our emotional exchange. Our foreheads come together, and we rest there, eyes closed. The number of ways to connect with him might be infinite, but it still wouldn’t be enough. I slide the bare toe in my sandals so it gently brushes against Jack’s leg.

Never disconnecting, I part my lips to speak and feel his breath mingle with mine. “There should be some sort of payment involved. For the paintings.”

“What were you thinking?”

I know he’ll refuse any monetary offer, but I have another idea. “A daily lemonade date on the front porch?”

“That sounds fair.” Jack grins, and I return a smile with knowing appreciation. We’re able to connect without the need for words.

My eyes drift back toward the sketch and painting, still resting beside each other in my lap. They’re completely different but exactly the same. Those things you’d never expect go together? They turn out to be a perfect pair once you give them a chance and trust the process.

Sour lemons and sweet sugar. Charcoal sketches and colorful paintings. Two people with troubled pasts who, when they lean on each other, find a way home.



IT’S THE GOLDEN HOUR and I’m alone in my garden. Daylight is softer as the sun bows toward the horizon. My emotions feel the same, smooth and velvety, with no hard edges. Thoughts of those peaches shared by Hank and Lydia on their first visit return to me. And the wisdom accompanying them: They’re a symbol of good luck, protection, and longevity. Indeed.

I stroll among the wild flowers growing taller with each passing day. My garden, in both a literal and a metaphorical sense, continues to flourish with

love. The scent of jasmine mixing with the other blooms creates a beautiful bouquet for all the senses. I hold the sketchbook and the canvas near to my heart, cherishing everything about this moment and place.

I am floating on an imaginary cloud, each step softer than the next. As I make my way up the wooden stairs inside, there's a cushiony sensation. I'm guided by something otherworldly. I find the perfect space, on the wall in my bedroom, to hang both works of art. They're what I want to see each morning when I wake up, a reminder of what home truly means.

I pause for a moment, contemplating what to do next. There is some hesitancy in my choice, but I know it's time.

Digging through the top drawer of my bureau, I push aside the assortment of socks. The item I'm searching for has been buried far too long. Dillon's book. I run my fingertips over the cover and place it on the bookshelf with my other novels.

I no longer feel the need to hide from my past. It doesn't control my present, or future.

An invisible force guides me as I visit each bedroom. I have a purpose, a broom, and majestic inspiration to pursue my vision. I name each room: bluebird, meadowlark, cardinal, grosbeak. But the one overlooking my garden is special, reserved for special guests. It will forever hold the dearest and most precious place in my heart. The chickadee suite will be a symbol of positivity, good luck, beauty, and love. At the first bed-and-breakfast in Pigeon Grove.

I smile and offer a small nod of gratitude to that first chickadee in my garden. The most innocent and unknowing things, in a single moment, connect you to the past, present, and future. And maybe even your soul mate.

A list of tasks grows in my mind, but I know the first thing I need and want to do. There's no longer that void between the two. I walk downstairs and out the front door, closing it gently behind me. Down the porch steps and beyond the flowering lavender, I arrive at the lamppost. It was nothing more than an afterthought when I arrived here on that rainy morning. But it's been waiting for me with everlasting patience. Those blurry things before us become lucid when viewed through a lens of acceptance and love.

I hang my homemade sign from the horizontal post. It will have to do for now. I'm sure Jack won't mind sharing the name of his artistic creation with me. It just feels right.

*Fly Away Home . . . Your home away from home since 1968.*

It's only proper to include Hank and Lydia's time in this home as well. The past, in all its forms, has helped me get to where I am today. It's a beautiful place, and it keeps encouraging me to take that next step forward.

No matter how unsettled the past may be, this town and its people remind me with unwavering certainty: It's never too late to come home.





# Epilogue

I've been dreaming of this day, even before it was a figment of my imagination. The universe works in mysterious ways. It presents opportunities at your front door when you least expect it. But it only does so when you're prepared to invite them inside for an extended visit. That's where I am now, on my doorstep, ready to set forth on this grand new adventure.

Their sedan pulls up to the curb. Nervous anxiety consumes me as the young couple emerges from the car. They're my first official guests.

The man keeps staring at the house while the woman's gaze is drawn toward the garden beside it. He carries a suitcase while they walk up the pathway together, arms interlocked.

I greet them at the bottom of the steps. "Good afternoon."

"This place is exquisite. Simply lovely." Her words are airy and light, coming from the heart. Even before we are introduced, I know everything will be okay.

"I have the chickadee suite reserved for you. It's our finest room available, with a full view of the garden. And you're welcome to stroll through it anytime you'd like." I extend my hand. "I'm Claire Perkins, owner of Fly Away Home." Speaking those words aloud for the first time creates an involuntary smile. I'll never grow tired of this wonderful feeling.

"Oh dear. Where are my manners? I suppose it's easy to become distracted when you're surrounded by something so beautiful." I know what she means. We're going to get along well.

"She speaks the truth." The man leans over and places a tender kiss on his wife's cheek. It's inspiring to see love bloom in others like it has for Jack and me. He reaches his hand out to shake mine. "I'm Benjamin. Benjamin Shaw. And this is my beautiful bride, Virginia."

"Call me Ginny." She smiles wide and sweet, as if we've been lifelong friends.

"Ginny and Benjamin, it's my sincere pleasure to be the host for your stay."

"Well, with service like this and a property so charming, we may never leave." A part of me believes he might not be joking. I can appreciate their attraction to this small town. There's an unspoken magic in Pigeon Grove. It continues to spread through the kindness and generosity of its people.

Jack makes his way down the sidewalk toward me. He carries a paper bag I know is full of lemons in one hand, and a bunch of flowering lavender in the

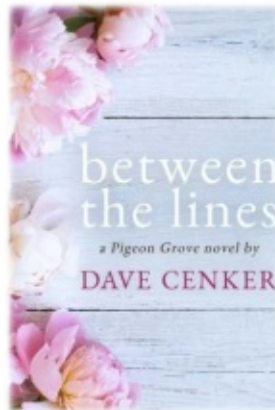
other. I wave to him as my smile grows ever wider. I might not have enough peach tart left for our daily porch date, but that's okay. Everything is okay. Actually, it's perfect.

I direct my focus back toward the newlyweds. They're still smiling with pinkie fingers interlocked by their side. "Mr. and Mrs. Shaw, if there's anything I can do for you, please let me know." And finally, the words I've been waiting to say and feel forever:

"Welcome home."

~ The End ~

*Did you enjoy your visit to Pigeon Grove? Would you like to experience more of this small town's magical charm? Your reservation for the chickadee suite at Claire's B&B awaits. I invite you to extend your stay by reading the first full-length novel of my Pigeon Grove series.*



*Follow Mason Shaw & Sophie Holland on a shared romantic journey as each struggles to answer a difficult question. Is accepting a troubled past safer than embracing an uncertain future? A willingness to confide in each other may be just what both need, but the past doesn't release its grip on either of them that easily. Trust hides in that fragile space between holding on and letting go. Fly away home to Pigeon Grove, revisit with some old friends, and discover the small-town romance, [Between the Lines](#).*



## Author's Reflection

**T**hank you, dear reader, for taking valuable time out of your day to walk alongside Claire and Jack on their journey together. Having the opportunity to share this story with each of you is something I cherish more than you know. In a serendipitous way, *Fly Away Home* has found its way home thanks to three people who were instrumental in bringing this story to your eyes.

Natalie, your everlasting encouragement and keen insights into the hearts of these characters helped me discover aspects of their personality that surprised me in the most delightful way. You've helped me lay down roots in Pigeon Grove as a place I'd love to remain as an author for years to come.

Rachael, your immersive writing coupled with the willingness to provide honest feedback helped me shape this story into one that has become everything I hoped it could be. The close-knit community portrayed in Pigeon Grove mirrors the one we share in the writing world, and I sincerely appreciate the opportunity to work with you as we continue honing our skills in this craft we love.

Mary Beth, your eye for detail and ability to make my words sparkle are both things I could never accomplish without your editorial expertise. Thank you for helping me bring the charm of Pigeon Grove to readers everywhere.



HOME CAN BE AN ELUSIVE word to define.

To some, it's a physical thing, a place that provides shelter from harsh elements threatening to disrupt our daily lives. It doesn't matter whether it's excessive heat, blistering cold, torrential rain, or icy accumulations. Those four walls and a roof keep each of these perceived risks at bay.

To others, home is an intangible entity. It's a feeling of warmth, security, and knowing you belong, wherever and whenever you find yourself. It has less to do with a particular location, and more to do with who you share the space with.

There is no right or wrong answer. There are as many definitions of home as there are people in the world. Often, the thing we *want* competes with that which we *need*. And sometimes, like Claire, we get caught in the middle. That void has

the power to consume us, and we find ourselves in an emotional purgatory, lost and alone.

But maybe there's a way to navigate that divide between want and need. And perhaps there's an even better definition for home nestled in that space.

*Every day is a journey, and the journey itself is home. ~Matsuo Basho*

There's so much beauty to see in the world surrounding us. While that process of discovery might sometimes beckon us to travel across continents, there are other times when we're asked to do nothing more than sit still and look inward.

It's not where we go or how far we travel that matters. It's what we learn and who we meet along the way. That is where we bridge the gap between want and need. That is where we find home.

May all your travels—physical, emotional, and spiritual—be an encouraging breeze beneath your wings. Appreciate the view, soar high, and find that place in your heart where everything is as it should be.

Embrace the spirit of adventure. It's never too late to come home.



## About the Author



DAVE CENKER is a romantic fiction author, writing stories infused with a kaleidoscope of emotions that nurture the heart while exploring elements of the human condition. He appreciates the opportunity to connect with readers through a shared emotional chord and the enchanted sentiments of a timeless love story.

Like coffee provides caffeine for the physical body, Dave's stories supply caffeine for the soul. He lives in the Sunshine State with his beautiful wife, amazing son, and three cats (the real monarchs of the house).

Visit him online at [www.davecenker.com](http://www.davecenker.com)

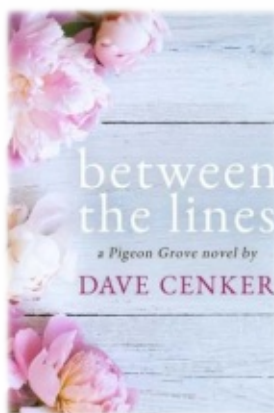


## Also by Dave Cenker

### *Pigeon Grove Series*

[\*Fly Away Home\*](#)

[\*Between the Lines\*](#)



### ***Is accepting a troubled past safer than embracing an uncertain future?***

Sophie Holland, quiet and unassuming on the outside, is lost in the shadows of her fiancé, Travis Turner. It's the same place her troubled past hides. With her thoughts and ideas longing to escape the protective shell she's carefully built, will the quiet southern charm of Pigeon Grove and its residents provide the nudge Sophie needs to help her dreams take flight?

To his family and friends, thirty-year-old Mason Shaw appears an open book. Unafraid to bare his emotions, few people know Mason has secretly buried the guilt of a decades-old decision, which still haunts him.

Can Mason overcome childhood demons to find his place in the world, or will the return of Travis, his high school archrival, threaten to destroy everything he believes... about fate, the pursuit of dreams, and love?

***Trust, of self and others, hides in that fragile space between holding on and letting go.***

[Find \*Between the Lines\* at all major retailers](#)

## *Standalone*



***How do you reinvent yourself when reality blindsides you and it feels like everything is conspiring against you?***

Nick McKenna has a bright future on the horizon. A successful medical career, a beautiful fiancée, and the determination to prevail at all costs. When a freak accident robs him of his promising life, a snowball effect builds as his world crumbles around him.

Leah Hewitt is the physical therapist tasked with helping Nick build a new reality for himself. With her own unsettling past, Leah has an opportunity to kick-start her new vocational calling into high gear. The only thing standing in her way is Nick's stubbornness and... a secret that could make or break more than her career.

***Are you a victim of your fate, or an architect of your destiny?***

Join Nick and Leah on their journey in this heartwarming debut novel that touches on tender emotions and begs the question...

***Is there the promise of a second chance for each of us?***

[Find \*Second Chance\* at all major retailers](#)