The Last Poem

Also by Courtney Peppernell

Pillow Thoughts
Pillow Thoughts: Deluxe Edition
Pillow Thoughts II: Healing the Heart
Pillow Thoughts III: Mending the Mind
Pillow Thoughts IV: Stitching the Soul
The Road Between
I Hope You Stay
The Space Between Us
Watering the Soul
The Way Back Home
Time Will Tell
A Month of Sundays
Out of the Ashes
Once Upon a Feeling: A Pillow Thoughts
Affirmation Deck for Reflection and Healing

The Last Poem

COURTNEY PEPPERNELL

ATRIA BOOKS
New York Amsterdam/Antwerp London Toronto Sydney/Melbourne New Delhi

THE LAST POEM
First published in Australia in 2026 by
Atria Books Australia, an imprint of Simon & Schuster (Australia) Pty Limited
Level 4, 32 York St, Sydney NSW 2000

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

New York Amsterdam/Antwerp London Toronto Sydney/Melbourne New Delhi
Visit our website at www.simonandschuster.com.au

A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN: 9781761631887

Cover design and illustration: Justin Estcourt
Interior design: Midland Typesetters, Australia
Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press

The paper this book is printed on is certified against the Forest Stewardship Council® Standards. Griffin Press holds chain of custody certification SCS-COC-001185. FSC® promotes environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world's forests.

For Claire, my second chance. I am so grateful to be loved by you, the kindest person I know. I love you. You are poetry to me.

And to my grandmother Jo, the "Winnie" in my life. Your zest for life, curiosity, and wide-open heart have been a guiding light. You taught me how to live with wonder and love with grace.

Prologue

Wren

We are all going to die—at some time, at some place, and in some way, because all life ends eventually. *How* is never guaranteed, *when* is a mystery, and *why* is one of life's most pondered questions. But what anyone will tell you is that the world will still carry on, even in our absence. The garbage trucks still collect the trash, the bills still arrive in the mail, the cars still fill the freeway, the sun still rises and sets.

Since the day my fiancée, Lucy, died, I knew that the world would carry on without her, but *my* world stopped. The trash piled up, the bills went unpaid, the car sat in the street for months on end, and the sky, like many other things in my life, lost all its joy and color. Since that day, I have been waiting for a morning when I open my eyes and her face is not the first thing I see. I have been waiting to listen to the rain and not hear her footsteps in between its soft patter. I have been waiting for a sun-drenched afternoon when I don't hear a knock at the door and think that it is Lucy coming home.

We lived in a townhouse in Manhattan. It was a beautiful brownstone, its timber finishes polished despite its age. Marigolds grew on the windowsills, and potted plants lived on the stoop. We had a balcony that overlooked a courtyard, wisteria twisting along the fences in lazy, fragrant spirals. In the summer I would sit and write from a small iron table on the balcony, shaded by

the vines, and in the winter I worked from my office, nestled in front of the fireplace with Lucy often curled up nearby, reading or simply watching the flames. I wrote everything, novels, books of poetry, collections of essays, and at the center of it all was Lucy. I wrote about my love for her, about the life we built together, about the adventures we shared and the quiet, ordinary moments that made up our days. Those books became bestsellers. The poetry collections earned me literary awards, and my novels garnered critical acclaim. Lucy, always my biggest cheerleader, had begged me to try my hand at a young adult fantasy series, an idea that had lurked in my brain but which I'd nearly dismissed. In the end, *The Lost Archives*, a series about a secret academy, enchanted books, and a hidden history that was never supposed to be uncovered, somehow became a runaway success. It dominated bestseller charts, was translated into dozens of languages, and was eventually adapted into a movie trilogy. My essays were featured in *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic*, and my name became synonymous with intimate, lyrical storytelling. The press loved me. I was B.W. Paisley, an author who, according to *The New York Times*, "could make even the simplest moments feel profound." I gave interviews, appeared at literary festivals, and attended galas, all with Lucy by my side. Together, we were the couple people admired, perfectly imperfect, unapologetically in love. We had a combined social media following of fifteen million.

Life had miraculously turned out the way I had always dreamt it would be: I was a successful author, I was engaged to the love of my life, and I was happy. On quiet Sunday afternoons, Lucy and I would stroll through Central Park, caramel lattes in hand, planning our wedding. We'd marvel at how we had managed to create such a life together, weaving our dreams into reality. We felt unshakable, as though nothing in the world could touch us. Until one evening, it all came crashing down.

We were driving home from a charity gala in New Jersey.

Lucy worked as an art dealer and, because of her job, we often attended those kinds of events: dressed up, smiling for donors, slipping shrimp cocktails onto tiny napkins. The city lights blurred past the windows, and I remember feeling tired but happy.

"I've been thinking about writing another poetry book," I said as casually as I could, though it would be my first in a decade. "With the wedding coming up, thinking about my vows has sort of put me back in the mood."

Lucy grinned. "I'm sure your editor will be excited to hear this."

"I may have already mentioned it to Peter," I admitted.

Lucy giggled. "I bet he squealed at the thought of his agent commission. So, how long have you been secretly writing poetry?"

I shrugged, a little sheepish. "Oh, not very long. I'd almost forgotten how to string a stanza together."

"You could never forget," she replied, softly. "You've always loved writing poetry."

I smiled. "I've always loved writing poetry about *you*."

Lucy laughed, her breath catching in her throat, her eyes glistening. "How many poems could you possibly write about me?"

But I was never given the chance to respond.

It was as though a bomb went off, and the world exploded. The sound of brakes screeching filled the air while glass shattered into sharp raindrops around us. Lucy's arm instinctively reached out across my chest, as though she could hold me in place as the vehicle skidded across the road. We slammed into something, and suddenly I was overwhelmed by the smell of motor oil, of burning rubber, of blood. Someone was screaming and I wondered in a daze who it was, until I realized the sound was coming from me.

Then complete silence enveloped us. It was as though time had stopped, like we were in a vacuum of empty space, and the only thought in my mind was of the woman I loved. I reached over to Lucy and—

"I love you, Brooklyn," she said, with her final breath.
I'd do anything to give her the answer to her question.
I could write about her forever.

I spent a week in the hospital. First responders had to cut us both from the vehicle. I had a fractured femur and a deep gash in my head that required twelve stitches, but that was it. My Lucy, though, was pronounced dead on arrival. My mind shut down and would only offer me bits and pieces of the accident in short bursts, my memories slowly and stubbornly returning as the weeks wore on. Once they decided I was strong enough to handle the truth, the investigators came to me. They told me a young pedestrian, all of five years old, had been struck and paralyzed, and that a John Doe had been injured in a separate vehicle, his condition critical. Their words were careful, their tone measured, as though there were pieces missing.

Of course, the media devoured the story. The accident wasn't just a tragedy; it became a spectacle. The press covered it relentlessly, twisting every detail, hungry for blame and scandal. They painted Lucy as reckless and irresponsible, her name dragged through headlines and talk shows. I became collateral damage, my grief laid bare for public consumption: "B.W. Paisley Injured and Her Fiancée Dead"; "Fatal Collision; A Night of Revelry Turns Sour"; "Tragedy on the Turnpike"; "B.W. Paisley Crash Being Investigated by NYPD." Paparazzi camped outside our brownstone, their flashbulbs lighting up the windows like strobe lights, chasing me down the streets of New York as if grief alone wasn't enough to destroy me. There were thousands of comments spiraling across social media; most were just people wanting to share their condolences, but others were accusations. The NYPD eventually claimed the accident had been Lucy's fault and that it was caused by her negligent driving. They even tried to insinuate

that she may have been under the influence, despite the fact that she hadn't had a drop to drink at the event. I was no longer "B.W. Paisley, celebrated author." I was "B.W. Paisley, tragic survivor." The same press that had once built me up now dismantled my life, piece by piece.

I stayed numb in those weeks after the accident. I could barely remember Lucy's funeral. In the months that followed, my lawyers dealt with lawsuits that did not feel justified, but I didn't pay them much attention. I just couldn't; everything felt so dark without Lucy. There would be no more walks in Central Park, no more wedding planning, no more falling into her arms at the end of a long day and feeling as safe as I could ever hope to feel. Instead, I had effectively become a widow, at twenty-nine years old. And of course, I stopped writing.

One afternoon almost a year later, staring out at the withered wisteria in our courtyard, I got a call from our wedding caterer, confirming the recipe for my grandmother's pecan rum bars—my favorite treat growing up. Lucy had planned them as a surprise. It was such a Lucy thing to do, and the weight of her loss hit me harder than it had in all the preceding months. How was I supposed to exist in a world without her? I suddenly realized I couldn't be Brooklyn Paisley anymore. Not without Lucy.

I packed Lucy's clothes, everything but her favorite sweater, and left the boxes at Goodwill, fleeing before I could watch them be unceremoniously sorted into dollar bins and color-coded racks. Then I told Peter, my literary agent, that I was taking a couple of weeks off—to get some space, to return to writing the poetry manuscript. And he believed me. As though, somehow, a few days away was all I needed to grieve the fact that the love of my life had been gone a year. The truth was, though, I already knew I wasn't coming back anytime soon, I just couldn't bring myself

to say it aloud. He spluttered something about how much faith my editor had in me, how she was ready to make me an offer for the poetry book, but I had already stopped listening.

I pushed away all other obligations into a corner of my mind and packed a single suitcase, taking Lucy's sweater, my favorite notebook, and a scrappy collection of cardboard drink coasters with me. Then I fled. What started as one week turned into two, then three, and then I stopped counting. I drove from city to city, then state to state, searching for Lucy. The highways were lined with tacky billboards, their clashing colors and chaotic layouts all blending together like a carnival gone wrong. Lucy, with her art dealer's eye, would have torn them apart. *Green on blue? What are we, in elementary school?* she would have quipped. Her job wasn't just about selling art, though; it was about connecting people. She was always traveling, networking with collectors, curators, and artists alike, raising funds to promote work she believed in. No matter where she went, she would always bring home a coaster from a local bar for me. It was her small way of letting me know she was thinking of me even when she was far away.

I visited upscale wine bars and sat on rickety stools at places with sawdust on the floor. I followed the coasters and drank at nearly all the bars she had been to, trying to find her in the bottom of a bottle of cabernet. I could almost see Lucy sitting beside me in the passenger seat or feel her hand resting on my knee as I drove. The farther southwest I drove, the stronger that presence became. The miles blurred together, and so did the days. I'd stop at roadside diners and gas stations and get coffee in paper cups that was so hot it scalded the roof of my mouth. I didn't know what I was searching for exactly. A sign? A miracle? Some proof that Lucy was still out there, somewhere? Every so often, I'd spot something out of the corner of my eye—a flicker of movement, a flash of dark hair—and my heart would skip, thinking Lucy really was there. Only it wasn't her. It was never her.

Until the day, six blurry weeks later, I arrived in Everston, Colorado, a small town tucked into the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, where the peaks rose sharp and jagged against the sky. The winding mountain road twisted through pine trees and rocky cliff edges, leading to a town of colorful and weathered buildings, nestled in the shadow of the hills. By chance or fate—I didn't know what I believed in anymore—I stayed. Because, as I drove down that final stretch into Everston, Lucy appeared beside me in the passenger seat—so real, it took my breath away. Her dark hair fell in soft waves around her face, her amber eyes sparkling with the sharpness I loved and missed. She wore my old flannel shirt, sleeves rolled up to her elbows; the gold necklace I'd given her last Christmas glinted in the sunlight. She looked at me with that familiar half smile, the one that always felt like it held a secret just for me.

"You found me," she said, her voice warm and teasing, as if she'd never left at all.

"Where have you been?" I asked, breathless.

"I've been here," she replied. "Waiting for you."

PART I

September

Chapter 1

Wren

The old gutters along the front of the house were falling apart and rusted in sections. It didn't matter how long I spent staring up at it, squinting through the bright sunlight was unfortunately not going to magically repair the gaping holes in the metal. There were little puddles of water pooling everywhere around the house, rotting the wood, creating muddy patches where the water had settled, having nowhere else to go.

"Miss?"

I turned to see Kyle, the plumber I had repeatedly called over the past month. His shirt was dirty, and flecks of mud and grime were splattered across his face, but he was grinning triumphantly from ear to ear.

"Fixed," he said proudly.

I stared up at the holes.

"Not the word I would use," I said dryly.

"I meant that the pipe in the laundry room shouldn't be leaking anymore."

I smiled, because *leaking* was a modest description, to say the least. A full-blown explosion was more like it.

"Well, I suppose one thing at a time," I said.

Kyle stared up at the gutters, shielding his eyes from the sun with a stained hand.

"This will need replacing too," he said matter-of-factly. "I can pick up supplies later today?"

"Please. Although I think a family of sparrows is taking up residence somewhere along the left side of the roof."

Kyle whistled. "There'll be a lot more than sparrows nesting around this house."

I shuddered at the thought of creepy crawlies, and quite possibly opossums or racoons, invading the house.

"I can hear things at night, moving around in the roof."

He considered for a moment.

"Could be haunted."

"That would be the least of my worries," I said. *I'm the only one here who is haunted.*

"What's that?"

"Nothing." I waved my hand at him. "Thank you for coming out so often. The owner really appreciates it."

"Real nice thing you're doing for Gill, you know, fixing this up. This house has been here for as long as I've been alive."

"I think it's probably been a bit longer than that," I said, laughing. "Gill has been really good to me, letting me stay, so it's the least I can do."

Kyle picked up his toolbox and threw a wrench into it before shutting it with a snap.

"I'll be back tomorrow with the supplies."

He began heading toward his truck but then paused a moment, looking at the front door with its chipped paint and the mesh screen full of holes. The hinges on it were so red with rust that the door was barely holding on.

"You know, my father always used to say that a fresh coat of paint could fix anything."

I stared hard at the front door. "He's probably right."

I watched as Kyle made his way down the cobbled path to the front gate, opening it and disappearing into the street.

Sighing, I looked back at the house, examining its steep gabled roof, arched eaves and Oregon pine trimmings weathered by time. It had to have been a beauty at some point in its life, with its big bay windows and large front porch, complete with a swing. I hoped that underneath the house's crumbling railings, somewhere in its weed-infested yard, past the shingles falling off the roof, there was still some charm left. If I restored the fir floors, wiped away the dust, shined the ornate brass, and repaired the stained-glass dormer windows, then maybe the house would come back to life. I had to believe this. I had to believe that things that were once broken could become whole again. Perhaps Kyle was right, maybe a fresh coat of paint would be the best place to start.

I was up to my arms in sawdust on the porch when I heard my name. It was Gill standing by the fence.

"Afternoon," he smiled. "I just saw Kyle. He said he's picking up some new gutters."

He looked up at the house, giving it a nod like they were two old friends.

"Word travels fast around here." I took off my safety goggles and put the circular sander down on the workbench I'd fashioned out of a couple of old sawhorses and some plywood I'd found forgotten in the shed.

Gill shrugged. "Oh, you know how small towns are."

I just smiled in acknowledgement and pushed open the gate to welcome him in, steering the moment away from myself. I had told Gill I was from the East Coast, but apart from this had only given him the barest of details about myself. He'd taken this in stride, never pressing me for more. I liked that about him.

"Everything okay?" I asked. "Is it the gutters? You don't want me to replace them?"

"Oh, everything's fine, just fine." He rocked back on his heels lightly, his hands in his pockets. "I was just out for an afternoon

stroll and thought I would check in on you, see how the house is coming along."

I was about to respond when a loud screech erupted from what sounded like the vicinity of the attic. Gill raised his eyebrows.

"Or perhaps I should say what needs to be moved along."

"Opossums," I said. "Or raccoons, I'm not sure yet."

"Ah, I know it's the strangest thing, but Edith always liked opossums. Never could understand why. Ugly buggers."

A look passed over his face then, just for a moment, so fleeting that most would miss it. But I knew the look, the ache of remembering.

I had met Gill in Sam's, the local diner. After arriving in Everston without a plan, I had been staying at a local motel, barely able to keep track of the time or the days. One morning, I decided to venture out from the stuffy motel room, sat down in a booth at Sam's, and ordered pancakes. Lucy had a habit of asking for a stack of three pancakes with butter, maple syrup, and a dash of sea salt. *To even things out*, she said. It was her go-to order, and as the waiter set the stack in front of me it turned out this was how they were served at Sam's. Anything could remind me of Lucy and would send me spiraling—a fresh bouquet of orchids, the smell of cinnamon, her favorite song on the radio, moonlight shining through the window in the middle of the night, honeybees. Especially honeybees, because she always liked to call me Bee. Sometimes I could hold it together, but other times it felt as though I'd had the breath knocked right out of me. Staring down at those pancakes that day reminded me that she would never enjoy them again. She would never look at me from across the table with a glint in her eye and insist it was the only way to properly enjoy pancakes. It broke me all over again, and I sat there, sobbing over my stack. Gill had been sitting at the counter,

and he turned around at the sound of my sniffling, setting aside the newspaper he'd been reading.

"You know, tears are like pancakes. They're best shared with someone else," he told me.

I gave him a weak smile and, with my wet napkin, gestured for him to join me.

"Dear, now why are you crying over a stack of pancakes?"

I thought for a moment about what I should tell him. I'd only just met this man, but I instinctively felt like I could trust him. Plus, it had been weeks since I'd had a real conversation with anyone. I had refused all calls from my publisher and agent. I texted my family periodically only to let them know I was still alive.

I told him the truth then, that they had reminded me of someone I loved who was no longer here. I didn't need to say anything else because Gill clearly understood.

From that day on, I met with Gill for breakfast each morning at Sam's. Sometimes we talked and other times we just sat together in comfortable silence. I learned Gill was a simple soul. He loved freshly baked apple pie with a dollop of whipped cream and a sprinkle of nutmeg on top. He liked football and religiously attended the local high school team's games every Friday during football season. He enjoyed fishing because, as he said, it brought him peace like nothing else could. Gill was a grandfatherly type, handing the local kids a few dollars for ice cream with a wink. He loved to play chess, and I had the feeling he was inclined to let his opponent win a game or two. He had been married to his high school sweetheart Edith for almost forty years. After she passed, he told me, everything became harder and the world looked duller, sounded muffled somehow. He still made their bed every morning with military-like precision, and he used Edith's favorite teacup for his coffee. But now that she was gone, he felt the pain in his knees more acutely, became aware of his slower

pace, and that he'd somehow gotten a half inch shorter. It became more difficult to maintain the old house where he and Edith had spent their lives together. Cracks began to spiderweb across the foundation, overgrown ivy threatened to cover windows, and the gutters filled with leaves. Gill knew it was time to move on; he was due to join some of his friends in the local retirement home.

"It will be good for me," he told me. "I am too old to be standing on a ladder, fixing the damn roof and patching holes. I'll fall and break a hip and that'll be the end of me. Besides," he winked, "I'll have plenty of people to play chess with."

"You don't want to sell it?" I protested when he suggested I live in the house.

He shook his head slowly, eyes turning glassy. "I've had real estate agents come through. Photos, listings, endless back-and-forth. They all say the same thing: 'You'll get a good price if you just stage it right.' But every time someone walks through, poking around like it's already theirs, it just breaks me."

He looked at me, a faint, sad smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "I'm not sure I can let it go just yet." My mind went to the tiny studio apartment in Queens that Lucy and I had rented before my career took off and royalty checks started coming in the mail. We loved that apartment and found it difficult to move. But our townhouse in Manhattan was something entirely different—it was a part of us. Even though I'd fled from it in a hurry, the thought of selling it and never being able to return, of losing that connection to Lucy, her presence carved into the walls, made me feel sick.

"But why me?" I asked. "You don't even know me."

Gill's expression was thoughtful. "No, I don't," he said. "But I know grief. And we certainly share that in common."

My head swam. *Am I out of my mind?*

"The truth is," Gill continued, "I don't need a tenant. I need someone who'll see the place for what it is. Someone who might

even breathe some life back into it." He paused. "And I think maybe you need that too."

I took Gill's hand and squeezed it. He knew I understood.

It was then that I saw some light return to his eyes. He glanced at me, a small grin on his face.

"It needs a bit of work, but I may have some coupons for the hardware store you could use?"

The only tool set I'd ever owned was one I'd purchased from Amazon.

"I'll take all the help I can get."

I immersed myself in the house, pouring every ounce of my energy into its creaking floorboards and peeling walls. It became my refuge, the ultimate escape, a place where I could disappear from the world, and lock my heartache outside.

I learned a few things about my new home in that first month after Gill gave me the keys. One-third of Colorado is forest—more than twenty-two million acres of ponderosa pine, aspen, blue spruce, and cottonwood willow. The roads wound through canyons, and, without warning, a snowcapped range rose in the distance, stealing my breath. Everston was the kind of town that felt like a secret, tucked in between these swaths of forest and mountain peaks. It was the kind of place where Sam's Diner never closed, where there was always a fresh pot of coffee brewing and a slice of pie waiting, whether at noon or two in the morning. The local florist included little handwritten notes with every bouquet, and the only bookstore in town had a resident cat that slept on the windowsill. On warm nights, the town square hosted movie nights under the stars.

I also learned a few things about old houses. Like how century-old pipes don't care about your schedule. Wood rot spreads faster than you think. Sometimes I'd peel back a wall expecting a quick fix, only to find the whole structure held together by sheer will. The house needed more work than I had anticipated, but then

again, so did I. As it happens, small town folk are curious about newcomers, which made staying invisible difficult. But I hadn't just picked a town no one would think to look for me in, I'd made sure I wasn't someone worth looking for. Grief had changed me. I'd lost weight in the way people do when they forget to eat, when exhaustion takes over hunger. I'd dyed my hair from dark to light brown. Swapped glasses for contacts. Traded my tailored jackets and polished pumps for thrifted sweaters and scuffed work boots. I started going by Wren, my middle name. It was easier that way, less explaining, fewer questions. Wren wasn't a name tied to fame or tragedy. It was a name that let me start over, to become someone unremarkable in a town where people knew each other by name and routine, not by headlines.

But calling myself Wren wasn't just about hiding. It was also about holding on to Lucy. Wrens were Lucy's favorite birds. She'd said so on our second date, and she loved that it was my middle name. She'd even gotten a delicate little tattoo on the inside of her wrist. She treasured all animals, but she had a quirky fascination with wrens; she thought their plump little bodies were adorable, and she loved the fierce protectiveness with which they watched over their nests.

She once told me that wrens were resourceful and would build their nests wherever they saw an opportunity—in a brush pile, inside a tree hole, or, if desperate, even in something like an old shoe. They could find a home anywhere. I wondered if I could do the same. I certainly didn't feel at home in Everston yet, but when a person is your home, where do you go when they're gone?

Gill cleared his throat and pulled me out of my reverie. "You're doing a great job on the old lady, you know. I can already see her coming back to life."

He walked over and placed a gnarled hand on the area that I'd been sanding and gave me a look of approval.

"She's tough, Gill, like me." We laughed. In working on the house, I'd already hammered my thumb—twice—and caught countless splinters, not to mention that I'd ripped my jeans on some old aluminium plates I tripped over in the shed.

But I didn't want it any other way. The hard labor allowed me to focus on something else apart from my own life; it gave me a sense of purpose while I was adrift. Gill letting me stay in his house in exchange for the work was just a bonus.

"You know . . . If you ever need other people to talk to, I know a few folks in town who—"

"Will play chess with me?"

He laughed. "Well, that too."

"You don't have to worry about me, Gill. I'm coping."

I could tell Gill that I'd found an elephant in his attic and it would be more believable than what I'd just said, but he nodded anyway.

"Well, if you ever change your mind, you know where to find me." He picked up the safety goggles I'd tossed aside and handed them to me.

"Best let you get back to it."

He smiled and waved, and I watched him as he slowly made his way down the driveway.

I sighed and returned to inspect my handiwork. I'd made good progress on the door: I'd scraped away the paint then sanded it down to the bare oak. The door had been stripped back down to its natural state—a clean slate, a blank canvas to start over—but I wondered if even a full restoration would really be enough to make anyone want to enter the house once more.

*

After taking another break, I gave the door a fresh coat of paint and replaced the wire screen window. I propped it back into place with new hinges and a shiny new brass knocker. Not bad. The evening rolled in then, bringing a familiar coolness to the air as the sun retired for the day. I decided I'd done enough work, so I went inside to wash off the grime that had caked itself to my skin.

As I had done for so many nights since I moved in, I sat on the porch swing, a blanket draped over my lap and a glass of wine sitting on the small wrought-iron table beside me. The swing was my favorite part of the house. It seemed to be the only thing that was untouched by age, as though it were deemed off limits to the elements. I stared out past the picket fence that encompassed the property, wildflowers snaking themselves through the palings.

"You should pick some."

I turned to see Lucy sitting beside me on the swing.

"I thought your favorites were marigolds?"

She shrugged. "These ones are pretty too."

I smiled, wondering how many I could pick if I started now. Lucy loved fresh flowers on the kitchen counter. I realized how much I missed always having fragrant blooms in the house.

"I should start putting fresh flowers on the kitchen counter again. The way you used to."

"It *would* brighten up the place a little," she said, tipping her head to assess the work I'd done today.

"I'll pick some in the morning. It'll tidy up the fence and brighten the kitchen."

Lucy shifted her gaze to me, her soft eyes narrowed in concern.

"Bee, why am I here?"

"Because I wanted to see you," I replied quickly, as if it were the simplest answer to the simplest question in the world. Because it was. "Besides, you said you would always be here. Don't you remember? You always said that to me. 'Bee, I'm not going anywhere.'"

She exhaled softly, her expression full of something I couldn't quite name. "Sometimes life doesn't let us keep the promises we make, Bee," she said softly. "You of all people should know that."

I swallowed hard. "Well, what do you want me to say?" My eyes burned, and I clenched my fists, willing the tears not to spill over.

"Goodbye."

"Well, I can't. I can't do that."

"You have to try."

"Why? Why do I have to say goodbye when I can sit out on this porch swing every night, looking at wildflowers, with you here beside me as more than just a memory? This is what makes Everston so special, because, of all the places in the world, I somehow found you here."

"That's not the reason you ended up here."

"Oh? And what is?"

I could see Lucy looking up at the sky, which was now dark and spattered with stars. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" she murmured. A car drove past us then, its headlights washing over me. When the light faded, Lucy was gone, and I was alone again.

Chapter 2

Henry

One afternoon, when I was nine years old and sitting cross-legged on the school library floor, cutting out small paper people, I asked our librarian a question.

"Mrs. Connolly, what does a librarian actually do?"

Sitting next to me, my brother Jacob scoffed.

"They obviously sort books, duh, Henry."

Mrs. Connolly looked at us thoughtfully.

"Well yes, we do sort lots of books, Jacob. But there are many other things a librarian does."

"Like what?" I pressed.

"Perhaps the most important thing we do is to help people find what they are looking for."

For a very long time after, I considered her answer. So long, in fact, that I carried it with me all the way through school, through college, and into my adult life, eventually becoming Everston's resident librarian. I made it my policy to help people find what they were searching for, no matter what it was. Over the years, I have found many things: a family's beloved missing border collie, sweaters in almost every color, answers to math equations, textbooks from one hundred years ago. I've taught more than half our local retirement home how to use computers and iPhones; I've helped with dozens of school projects; I've organized scavenger hunts, trivia nights, coding classes, free lunches

for the homeless. I've printed life-size posters of various pop stars for fans, was once asked if I could supply fake IDs, and I've called 911 on more than a few occasions. I've heard, seen, and done it all—I have always tried to find the answers for people, because that's just what librarians do. We search, we find, and we deliver. In my own life, though, the answers haven't come so easily. I'm still searching, sifting through endless questions, hoping to find something—anything—that gives grief meaning. But the truth is, there are just some questions that don't have answers.

Everston had been home my whole life. It was small-town America, engulfed by steep peaks that touched the sky. The last operational mine closed in the early nineties, and since then, we stayed alive mostly through tourists filtering through the town on their way to Colorado backcountry. On Main Street, you could find all the things that made Everston, well, Everston. There was the Hobby Shop and Smithey's Furniture Store, and there was House of Glamor selling prom dresses, some of which had been on the rack since the eighties. There was one movie theater left in town, which mostly played black-and-white films, and there was a motel called the Green Leaf, run by Barbara Matthews, who won Colorado's state beauty pageant in the seventies. There was an old antique store filled with oddities and knickknacks, and paintings by our local artist Merrill, who is ninety-two years old and still judging our annual pickle-eating contest. We had Sam's Diner (owned by, if you couldn't guess, Sam), with checkered floors, red leather booths, and drip coffee. There were three bars, a café, and an auto repair shop that gave you a free donut every time you had your vehicle serviced.

If you headed farther into town, there was a church, painted white with a blue door, with bluebells growing in the gardens around it. There was a small fairground with a permanent Ferris

wheel that lit up every night; the other rides came and went with the county's various fairs, with staff arriving from miles away to set up rides and games. We had a school that housed elementary and middle school students, with a tiny high school next door. Our fire station and sheriff's office were combined—if you called one, you were just as likely to get someone from the other department—and the sheriff and fire chief had both been there since before I was born. There was no hospital in town, just old Dr. Williams, who was hard of hearing. He could wrap a sprained ankle and reset broken bones, diagnose the flu, and hand out cough drops like they were candy, but that was about it. For anything worse, you'd have to head to the town over for a hospital.

There was no McDonald's to be found here, no Walmart or Home Depot, but there was Eddie's Hardware Store and Pat's Grocer, an alpine ski shop and gift shops. However, I believed that the greatest place in the whole town, even if I were a little biased, was the library. Everston Public Library was not a grand building that towered over the main square. It certainly didn't have marble flooring, spiral staircases, or stained-glass windows like some libraries in giant cities. In fact, the building used to be a bakery until it was bought by the town, renovated, and turned into what it was today. Although, from time to time, both myself and patrons alike would swear we could still smell fresh bread in the air. Ask anyone from Everston and they would tell you that our town was the heart of the high country, but if you asked me, I'd say Everston Library contained all the heart we needed.

The library sat on a corner of Main Street; an alleyway separated it from the Hobby Shop and the library's parking lot. I liked to arrive by seven thirty every morning. In those early hours, the library was still and silent, and I liked to imagine that it was asleep and softly dreaming. This morning was no exception,

despite the cold chill in the air. There was a coffee shop across the road, and the grinders had been going since before dawn, singing out to the brick and stone buildings. The smell of coffee beans wafted into the street as I parked directly in front of the library and headed toward the front doors. Everston's businesses had taken to repainting the exteriors of their shops in the last few years and, as a result, Main Street had ended up looking rather colorful. When I saw this, I also petitioned to have the library painted. Unfortunately, the paint shop mixed up the colors, so we were left with bright terra-cotta bricks with teal green finishes. I felt like it only added to the charm.

Beside the front doors was a large metal box with a slot and a sign that read *Book Returns*. I had found all sorts of things in the library return box—trash, Ping-Pong balls, Barbie dolls, diapers, even half a cedar branch once. I had tried all sorts of preventatives, including nice signs that said *For Library Books Only!* and an old webcam that I fashioned into a mock security camera, but people still put all sorts of things into the slot. The worst, of course, was the occasional firecracker. This morning, however, I noticed a piece of paper stating *Read Me* duct-taped to the front of the box. Curious, I peeled the paper off and opened its folds.

Will be in today. Need to negotiate.

I had received notes like this before—*I can't find the book, sorry*; *I accidentally spilled my coffee on the book*; *My dog ate the textbook*; *If I bring my own headphones, do I still need to check out audiobooks?*—and also some rather colorful book reviews, but I had to wonder what someone possibly needed to negotiate with me.

Shrugging, I unlocked the front doors and reached over and hit the main power switch. The lights slowly flickered on, and the library awoke. The library had undergone many changes over

the years, but one thing I always kept was a banner that hung above the entryway. It said: *All Are Welcome.*

After placing my things behind the reception desk, I made my way to the staff room, powering up the coffee machine and retrieving my mug from the cupboard. I was perhaps the only person on our staff who used the coffee machine for tea and not coffee. The machine whirred to life, rumbling and pouring the hot water into my mug, and I dunked a tea bag several times for good measure. I relished those first few morning sips.

"Morning, Henry."

I glanced up as Lana, the library's assistant director, popped her head through the door to greet me. Lana was in her late twenties, and she'd been my colleague and friend for the past five years, a steady presence in the library and an expert at keeping things running smoothly.

"Morning, Lana. You're here early."

"Pulled up just after you! I thought I'd better get a start on those final Imagination Week programs."

"That's probably a good idea," I said. Our Imagination Week programs were always very popular; it was an entire week dedicated to creativity and the books we loved. There was dressing up and events and it was all a lot of fun, but the prospect of how many schoolchildren would be funneling through the library over the next week sent a small shiver down my spine.

"Let me know when you've finished. I'll run the final programs by the board, and then we should be all set!"

I wandered over to investigate the contents of the fridge, searching for the other half of a bagel I had left the other day, and making a mental note to clean out any other bits of old food.

"Do you know what you're dressing up as?" Lana asked.

I glanced up, a bit sheepish.

"I'm thinking Paddington Bear because I have an old Halloween costume I could reuse."

"Oh, but that's cute," Lana said. "The kids will love it. I'm thinking Ms. Frizzle."

I grinned. "You know, I think Dev would go as the Magic School Bus if you baked some of those chocolate chip cookies for him."

She shook her head.

"He would do anything for those cookies."

Our tech assistant Dev was a ball of fun, and he really would do anything for Lana's chocolate chip cookies.

The library didn't open until nine, but arriving early meant I got to enjoy at least an hour of quiet time and read my emails without any interruptions. Once the doors opened, it was a free-for-all, and I spent most of the morning at the front desk. I didn't notice how much time had passed until my stomach grumbled around noon. Before I could sneak a snack under the desk, though, a man shuffled over to me. His silver hair sprawled across his brown suede coat, and he cradled something in his arms.

"Can I help you?" I adjusted my glasses.

"Hello. I left a note for you last night."

I tilted my head, then remembered the scrap of paper I had found this morning on the book return, something about a pending negotiation. This would be interesting.

"Oh, yes. What do we need to negotiate today?"

"Well, I have some library fines," he said, and handed me a printed receipt. I looked down then back up at the old man, trying to smother a laugh. His total came to $236; he'd had these fines for more than a decade.

"I see," I said slowly. "Well, sir, there are some options we could—"

"Here's what I was thinking," he interrupted. "I could pay it off with this."

He placed on the desk what looked like a mound of clay

accessorized with shiny pieces of plastic, all smushed together into something that loosely resembled a frog.

"One of a kind," he said. "I know how much libraries love original art."

I inspected the "art," trying to locate any evidence of value—a famous signature, rare materials, anything—and wondered if perhaps he thought we also functioned as a museum. I supposed I did have a habit of collecting knickknacks, so we did look a little bit like a museum, what with all the decorations I had accumulated over the years.

"Who is the artist?" I asked cautiously.

He smiled brightly. "Me! Made it myself."

I stared at him, trying to decide if this conversation was actually taking place or if I was dreaming, when suddenly I heard a loud popping noise, and the ceiling above the readers' corner exploded, water bursting through the panels, soaking everything in its direct path.

"What in the world?" I gasped, and raced around the counter toward the commotion. "Lana!" I called out urgently. "Go turn off the water supply!"

I saw Lana scramble out from the science fiction section she had been restacking, and she bolted toward the front doors in the direction of the valve.

I hurried to save whatever I could, moving armchairs out of the way, punting aside a small coffee table, and tripping over myself to rescue an antique reading lamp before the water could claim it. But the floor was already a lake and there was now a large, gaping hole in the ceiling. The water finally stopped shooting out like a geyser when Lana flicked the water main off, reducing itself to a trickle, then a drip. I stood with my hands on my hips, shaking my head at the damage. It was a disaster. The water had soaked the rugs and all our throw blankets and, most critically, some books.

"So," my silver-haired sculptor said, holding up his FrankenFrog statue. "Do we have a deal?"

It took me thirty-five minutes to get ahold of Kyle, our local plumber. Kyle was steady in a crisis, just like his dad had always been back when he was running their family business. I once had the misfortune of having pipes burst in my bathroom, shooting god only knows what over everything, but Kyle's dad, ever the efficient optimist, had me back up and running in no time.

I gazed up at Kyle on his ladder, praying that he could work that same magic in our library.

"Thanks for coming," I said. "Honestly it just sort of exploded."

Kyle muttered something inaudible as he continued to prod around up there.

"I mean, I know the building is old, but she's still holding up overall, don't you think?"

Kyle continued muttering, too low for me to catch all of it, but it sounded a lot like he was comparing the library to his great-great-great-aunt.

"How long do you suppose this will take to fix?"

Kyle shifted on his ladder so that I could finally hear him.

"Well, I need to replace all of the piping and the ceiling panels, so this section will be out of action for a little while."

I groaned.

"So, no chance of having us up and running tonight?"

I heard him laugh, echoing into the roof.

"I'm good," he called down. "But I'm not a wizard."

I sighed. "It's just that I host meetings here every other Tuesday, and I happen to have one tonight."

"Can you meet somewhere else in the library?"

"No. All the other areas are booked."

"Can you postpone the meeting?"

"Well, I could, but it wouldn't be ideal—might set some of our progress back."

Kyle shifted something in the roof, producing a loud thud, and suddenly, rusty orange water poured down onto the floor.

"Yuck," he said.

I looked down at the rugs; they would now absolutely need replacing. Yuck indeed.

"What about having them meet at Brandy's instead?" Kyle asked.

"Brandy's?" I repeated.

"Yeah, my girlfriend Sasha manages the bar—I'm sure she'd host your group."

I crossed my arms, realizing Kyle probably didn't know *why* our group actually met.

"Yeah, I'm quite fond of Brandy's, and Sasha, of course, but we're a grief counseling group, Kyle . . ."

"I see," he replied thoughtfully. "Well then, surely it's important for your group to meet, even if it's at a bar. It's not something you should cancel, Henry."

He fumbled for a moment before handing his phone to me.

"Just ring Sasha, Tuesdays aren't busy at Brandy's. Everyone is usually across the road at The Den for bingo night, so I'm sure she'll stay open for you."

I sighed again, pushing my hair back from my forehead. Brandy's it was.

I scribbled a note and left it at the front of the library to explain the venue change, before calling all the regular group members to let them know about the flooding and our temporary meeting location. Nearly everyone asked if I had called Kyle, and when he heard me confirming to everyone that I had, I saw his chest puff out just a bit, his smile growing a little wider.

"Don't let anyone into this area," Kyle said, making his way down the ladder. "I'll crunch some numbers and text you with a quote."

Even though Kyle always tried to be fair with his pricing, judging by the water damage, this wouldn't be cheap.

"I'll have to run this by the board as soon as you get back to me." I wasn't looking forward to it. Most of the board members were octogenarians and very cranky when it came to expenses.

He straightened his ball cap.

"I'm on it, Henry. We'll get it fixed. Don't worry so much, buddy."

I grimaced. Easier said than done.

Kyle grabbed his ladder and gave me what I supposed was a friendly arm punch and left.

I stayed there a moment, my shoes squishing into the soggy rug as I took in the damage. Water pooled around the legs of the chairs, and the bookshelves warped and darkened along their edges. But it wasn't the repairs I was most worried about—those could be managed, fixed with time and effort. I was more concerned with the thought of our grief group not having their safe, warm spots in the armchairs in their favorite corner of the library. It wasn't just the physical nature of the space, it was the solace it offered, the understanding nods, the shared stories, the unspoken comfort of being surrounded by others who understood. And now, as I stood in the mess, I wondered how to carry that refuge somewhere else.

By the time the day started to wind down, Lana and I had played tag team seamlessly, the product of having worked together for so many years. While she managed the rush of kids, ushering them to tables for an afternoon of origami, I had managed to mop up

all the water and move the wet books into the staff room to dry. Eventually I was able to find a moment to myself and make a cup of tea.

"What happened to the readers' corner?"

I jumped as Dev, our tech assistant, walked into the staff room, dumping his bag in a corner.

"Sorry, Henry." He laughed. "Didn't mean to startle you."

I waved my hand over my mug.

"It's not you. Just . . . don't ask." I sighed.

"A busy day here at Everston Library, it seems," he said, grinning and handing me a brown paper bag.

"Mindy baked some apricot cookies last night."

"She's an angel," I said, fishing one out, savoring the sweet aroma over my tea.

I finished my cookie and watched as the sun started its descent, hitting the front doors, sending a fiery gleam of light spilling across the floor, warm and inviting. Whatever happened to be going on in the outside world, the library was the one place I always felt safe. It held my memories, the beautiful ones and the ugly ones, layered into every corner like the rings of an old tree, each one marking a moment of time.

Jacob made up so many of those rings. Even now, all my memories of him—both good and bad—haunted me. Two years had passed, and it still didn't feel real that he was gone.

It had started with fatigue. He grew tired more easily, which was unusual for him. Jacob was a runner. He would run everywhere, even in the middle of winter, when Everston was bitterly cold and the snow piled several feet high. When he stopped running for a few weeks, I became suspicious, but he brushed me off whenever I questioned him. Not that that was out of character for him. Jacob was born two minutes and twenty seconds before me, and therefore by birthright (according to him) he was always right.

He started making excuses. "I'm probably just working too hard. I'm sure it's nothing, and I'll be back to normal soon. I just need to get more sleep."

But normal never returned. One afternoon, while we were in my snug two-bedroom house, Jacob reading the paper as I busied myself making dinner, he suddenly fell off the kitchen stool and screamed. It was the kind of scream that makes every hair on your body stand up, the kind of scream that you feel right through your bones. I had never driven so fast in all my life, but the ride to the hospital felt as though it took decades, Jacob agonizing in the front seat, begging me to go faster, repeating that something was wrong.

After a battery of tests and days of stress, my emotions rocking me every which way, we discovered that my twin, the person I had entered the world with, and whom I had always counted on, had advanced stage IV pancreatic cancer. After our dad had suffered a minor heart attack a few years earlier, our parents had retired to Hawaii, determined to embrace a slower pace of life. Without them here, I slipped into caregiver mode without hesitation. It felt as though our small world had suddenly shrunk to just the two of us. Jacob moved in with me, leaving behind his apartment across town, so I could support him. I remember those final months as though it were a grim songbook—I can recall every dirge, every sour note. The doctor's appointments, the failed treatments, the arguments between Jacob and me.

He had wanted to savor every last minute and I wanted him to keep fighting. When Jacob died, I did what any librarian would do: I tried to find the answers. *Why did he have to go? What else could I have done? When will my heart stop feeling as though it's buried under twenty million tons of rubble?* The only problem was that, at the same time, I just wanted the world to end. I prayed for an asteroid, an explosion, every natural disaster I could think of, anything

to turn the lights out. Jacob was my brother, my twin; in what world could I possibly exist without my other half?

Grief is a shadow and the world prefers the light. When you are grieving, people give comfort for a short amount of time and then expect you to return to normal, but they don't understand that things will *never* be normal again. Old habits need to be undone and new habits need to be formed—all while there is a hole in your heart completely consuming you, every hour of every day.

I buried myself in my work to forget the pain. I made finding answers for others the most important priority in my life, especially when I had none for myself. I told everyone who asked that I was fine, I was coping, I was moving on. People told me all the time, *You are so strong, Henry Briggs. Jacob would be proud. Look at you, such an example to this town.*

I suppose the only one that knew the truth was the library itself. It kept me company when I couldn't find the strength within me to go home. Instead, I'd sit in the middle of the history aisle, accompanied by a bottle of Glenfiddich—a gift from Mayor Ashcroft for helping to write her campaign speech—staring blankly at half a row of Van Gogh biographies.

On our thirty-sixth birthday, as I sat in that same spot, my vision blurring and my chest aching, I noticed a book on the shelf that was out of place. I reached for it and cracked its spine, flipping to a random page, settling my gaze onto a poem:

This is not the end, not at all.
I have only ventured to the place
between night and day—
I still hear you when you call,
I still listen to all you have to say.
Cry for me if you need to, but laugh;
hold my name in your heart,
the way you have always done so.

Think of me often, but do not allow
these thoughts to consume you.
Live as I have always wanted
you to live.
For I will see you again,
somewhere, one day,
and we will smile.

My eyes welled up with hot tears that threatened to spill over. I forgot my whiskey, and for a moment I even forgot my grief. Or maybe it's not accurate to say that; rather, I realized that grief didn't have to rule over me. I could sit with it and we could talk to one another, grief and me, but it wasn't the only conversation partner I had to limit myself to.

That's not to say that I didn't still feel despondent—how could I not at times? My other half was gone. But I found that poetry could drag me out of the dark hole I was in; it could remind me to look at the sky, to go home and sleep in my bed instead of on the library floor. I wondered if others might feel like me.

I had no idea how my little idea might be received, so I started small. I put up a simple sign at the library desk: *Grief Support Group.*

First, one person inquired, then two more, and then another. I contacted Max Turner, a semiretired therapist who lived only a few blocks away, to see if he might be interested in joining us. Turned out he was.

Over the last four months, we'd settled into a steady routine. We met every other Tuesday evening, mostly to share how we were feeling. There were tears and jokes and snacks. And, as corny as it might sound, there was comfort. We were all looking for answers to our grief, and it seemed—even if our little group wasn't an answer itself—that we were on the path to finding them.

*

"I'm heading home, Henry," Lana said, putting on her cardigan. "Anna is supervising the study group and Dev is on desk. You need anything from me before I leave?"

"All good here. Do you have the spread list to give to the school?"

She nodded. "Emailed it to the principal this afternoon. There are no allergies to report, so I think your lemon poppy seed cupcakes are a go."

I laughed.

"I think they're more likely to go through the marshmallow squares than the cupcakes."

"Imagination Week is going to be great. Try not to lose sleep over it."

I raised my eyebrows. "We're librarians, Lana; we lose sleep over everything."

She just smiled and waved, heading out the door into the night, car keys in hand.

I went to the sink to wash my mug, leaving it on the dish rack to dry overnight. Sometimes I still felt the urge to sleep in the library, wishing I never had to leave. Things would be easier if I could stay hidden in the history aisle, rather than face the darkness that kept me up at night, but Kyle was right—I knew these meetings were important, not just for the members, but for me too.

I was still tallying how many lemon poppy seed cupcakes I would need to impress an entire class of middle schoolers when I got to Brandy's. I wanted to show the kids there was more to the world of confections than just sugar, that there was a particular kind of joy that came with picking poppy seeds out of your teeth.

"Henry," a voice called out. I looked up to see Gill standing outside the entrance.

"Hey, Gill, glad you're here. I brought you a little present." I handed over a Twix chocolate bar, the kind that Edith used to keep in the house to appease Gill's sweet tooth.

Gill smiled at me, the creases in his face deepening.

"You're a good boy, Henry. I'm sorry you're having to deal with such a mess. When will the library be back up and running? Kyle get back to you yet?"

I sighed. I didn't want to think about it right now.

"Yeah, hopefully next week or the week after. We'll just have to see."

"Brandy's is a nice replacement, though. Do you think Max will notice if I pop over for a whiskey?"

"He may." I grinned and held the door open for him. Let the old man have his nightcap.

Brandy's was the oldest bar in Everston. It was originally owned by a Brandy Johnson and then passed on through the family. The original Brandy was said to have been a firebrand, one of very few female business owners at the time. She could drink plenty of men under the table, and long after she retired, she coached her granddaughter through Prohibition. Now, it was run by Sasha, Brandy's great-great-great-granddaughter.

There were photos of bar patrons plastered on every inch of the walls, moose and deer heads keeping watch, old license plates tacked behind the bar. A neon Budweiser sign welcomed customers, flickering in the night, a constant beacon for those looking to drink. Floating shelves ran along the walls, with rickety bar stools placed underneath, coasters scattered everywhere, and rows and rows of bottles suspended on glass shelves behind the ancient oak-slab bar. It hadn't really changed in decades, but it was warm and inviting, and that's really all anyone asked for in this town.

As Gill crinkled open his chocolate, I gathered some bar-stools and set them up in a circle at the farthest end of the bar.

Sasha emerged from the back to oversee, folding her arms and smiling warmly. In the time after Jacob's death, I really appreciated that Sasha didn't try to avoid me, as some did, and also didn't go overboard with pity, holding my hand and whispering platitudes. She was just Sasha, the same as she was before Jacob passed.

"Everything okay, got what you need?"

"I think we are all set. I appreciate this, truly."

"It's not a problem, I'll be floating around, just trying to unclog the dishwasher in the back, so yell if you need anything." She wiped her hands on a towel and swung it over her shoulder, disappearing behind the bar.

The door opened and, one by one, our group members filtered in, waving and chatting, excited to be at our new meeting place.

"I'll have a gin and tonic, please," Rita said to the bartender on duty, hanging her coat on the rack just by the door.

"Oh, that does sound nice," Bobby said behind her, ordering one as well.

The thing about grief is that it doesn't care who it targets. It will visit anyone's doorstep, and, when you open the door, you never know who will walk in, and who might walk out.

That's why our group wasn't just for those who had lost someone due to death; it was for anyone carrying the weight of loss in all its forms. Sorrow has many faces, and each of us had been forced to confront one of them. In addition to Gill, our members included Bobby, whose parents were highly conservative and who hadn't accepted his sexuality. Winnie's husband, Cliff, just up and left one day—no note, no warning, just gone. Julian was from the next town over; his wife had had five miscarriages and didn't know he attended. Emerson, our youngest member, was in a horrific car accident a year ago. She was left with a broken body and a broken heart. Rita's sister had dementia and most days didn't recognize her. Olivia, our town reporter,

joined from time to time but stayed mostly silent. Her mother, our nightly news anchor, died of a brain aneurysm three days shy of her sixtieth birthday. And then there was me, still trying to navigate a world that felt incomplete. We were a motley crew, and our first meetings had been awkward, with all of us unsure how to share our pain without stepping on someone else's. But over time, we relaxed, and the group became a rare place where we could be vulnerable without fear of judgment. No matter what heartache we brought to the table, we all understood its weight, and that each of us had a seat.

As I stole a glance at my watch, Max breezed through the door in his usual cashmere sweater and thin-framed glasses. He eyed the moose head on the wall suspiciously, then strode over and perched on a barstool with us.

When everyone was settled, and those who'd grabbed a drink had been served, Max looked up.

"Shall we begin?" he said, crossing his legs. "How is everyone?"

There was a low murmur in response before Julian's voice cut through.

"My daughter had her first ballet recital this week," he said. "I cried halfway through."

I smiled, shifting on my barstool. It wasn't as comfortable as a library armchair, but it would do.

Max looked at Julian, his eyes kind. "That sounds fun. Anything else interesting about your week?"

Julian was from Norvale, about thirty minutes north of Everston. It was a much bigger town, sprawling through the valley, with chain supermarkets, shopping plazas, and a steady stream of traffic weaving between the mountains that framed its edges. He had a daughter, Hazel, and a son, Miles, but he and his wife, Cara, had been trying to conceive another child for years, a journey marred with pain. In our last meeting, Julian mentioned that he told his wife he was working extra night shifts,

because he didn't know how to tell her that instead he was driving to Everston for these meetings. He couldn't bring himself to tell her that he was suffering, too, in a different way.

Julian cleared his throat.

"I worked a lot this week. Sometimes it's easier to be at work than it is to be at home, but I feel guilty for that," he said.

"Why do you feel guilty?"

"Because it's difficult to grieve for a baby I've never met, and I can't tell my wife because she's in so much pain."

"That doesn't make your pain any less real, Julian," Bobby said quietly.

"It just doesn't feel real," Julian continued. "My wife, you know, she can barely eat, barely sleep, barely get out of bed, she cries all night long, she says the names we had picked out for the babies over and over again. But me?" he drew in a breath. "I just go about my day trying to get from one thing to the next. As though the baby never existed. How—how is that not the most horrible thing you ever heard?"

"Regardless of the loss we face, and even if that loss is shared with another, we all still mourn in different ways. Your own experience is valid," Max said, then gestured toward Gill. "Gill, what was the first thing you did after Edith passed?"

Gill thought for a moment. "I was angry. I remember going inside the shed in my backyard and screaming at the walls for hours."

"And you, Bobby? What do you do every time you think about your parents?"

"I cry," Bobby said. "And then I watch *Titanic*."

"I cut up photos of my ex or I blast some music," Emerson offered. Max nodded, slightly amused.

"Winnie?"

"I read a lot when Cliff left to distract myself. It worked sometimes," she said.

"I did a seven-mile hike and cursed at every tree on the way back," I said, shrugging lightly.

"You see, our experiences with grief are ever-changing. They can look wildly different from person to person, or sometimes they can look very similar. Just because your grief looks different from your wife's grief does not make you a monster, Julian," Max said.

Julian bowed his head and studied his hands in his lap. "I can't argue with that."

"Henry, how was your week?" Max asked, giving me a thoughtful look.

I adjusted my glasses, pushed them up the bridge of my nose.

"Well, nothing out of the ordinary, although Imagination Week isn't too far off, so I'm starting to look into ideas for it."

"Oh, Imagination Week!" Winnie interjected. "My neighbors' kids are so excited for it. Their mom's already started on their costumes."

"Ah, that's wonderful!" I replied. "Do you know if they enjoy lemon poppy seed cupcakes?"

Max diplomatically cleared his throat and I straightened on my stool.

"It sounds exciting," he interjected. "Did Jacob ever attend any library events with you?"

I nodded. "Yes, all the time. He had a special affinity for books, and he always wanted to work in publishing."

Max shifted and crossed his other leg. "Do you find these events difficult without him?"

I deflected. "Actually, I received a phone call this week, someone asking after Jacob. An old colleague of his who didn't know of his passing. I had to tell her he was no longer with us."

"And how did she respond?"

"Well, she said that Jacob will always be with us."

Emerson groaned loudly. "I hate it when people fucking say

that." Winnie clucked and Emerson turned red. "I mean, I don't like it when people say that."

I hid a small smile. I hadn't expected Winnie and Emerson to have grown so close in such a short amount of time, but I supposed that loss connects us to people we otherwise may have never known.

Max was unfazed. "Why does it bother us?"

When no one answered, I said, "Well, because that's half the problem, isn't it? My brother isn't with me. He's gone, and I need to accept that."

When I would first wake up in the morning, still groggy, I would sometimes forget that he had died, the knowledge having not yet kicked me in the gut. I could almost convince myself that he was just away on vacation, and any minute he would turn up on my doorstep, and grouse at me for not going to the gym more often. Jacob and I were like night and day. He was supremely confident, and I was utterly reserved. He liked beer; I enjoyed a nice brandy. He liked football, hockey, baseball, hiking, parasailing, and bungee jumping. I liked reading, old movies, sudoku, baking, and antique stores. We were not identical twins, but when Jacob kept his hair short and had forgotten to do laundry and needed to borrow my clothes, people would sometimes mistake him for me. No matter how different we were, we were still each other's other half. Jacob always knew what I was thinking before I'd even say it. We would finish each other's sentences, and, despite his need to always be right and to challenge me at every opportunity he got, he would always follow up with a smile, and say, "I never doubted you." I knew when Jacob was near, even if I hadn't yet caught sight of him—we had our own language. So how could I have not known that the other half of me was so sick? The thought lingered with me, a heavy guilt I had yet to be able to resolve, as our group session wound to a close. We ended with tea and a poetry reading, as usual, though Sasha didn't have an

electric kettle, so she used the espresso machine. I swear it tasted faintly of coffee. *Not ideal.* This week it was Bobby's turn to choose, and he picked a poem by Maya Angelou. As he read about great trees falling, I thought of Jacob and what kind of tree he would be. Probably a redwood. He was always the strongest and tallest in the room.

"No Olivia tonight?" Rita asked, pouring hot water into a mug and dunking her teabag, staining the water.

I glanced at the door momentarily, thinking perhaps Olivia would arrive late in a flurry of golden hair, cheeks flushed from the report she had been chasing for the day.

I shrugged. "Not tonight, I guess. But there's always next session."

"I worry for that girl," Rita said. "All the pressure the station puts on her, trying to fill her mother's shoes. And you know"—she glanced around conspiratorially—"the last I heard she was seen kissing Sally Aslop!"

I peered at Rita through my glasses. "Rita, we don't meet here for gossip . . ."

"But did you know, Sally Aslop is married to the pastor in Norvale! My church ladies told me all about—"

I poured some sweetener into Rita's mug: two Splendas. I'd memorized everyone's order by now.

"It's none of our business," I said gently, handing her the mug. "Besides, didn't Max just remind us to give people space?"

Rita pursed her lips and looked down at her mug, stirring it absently. For a moment, I could see her as a little girl, caught sneaking an extra cookie before dinner, embarrassed to be chided by an adult.

"Everyone deals with things in their own way," I added with a small shrug. "Maybe instead of guessing, we just hope Olivia turns up next time. She'll feel more welcome that way."

"Of course," Rita said softly, her voice trailing off. "I just miss . . ."

For as long as I could remember, when I rode my bike home from school as a kid, I would see Rita and her sister Martha on their front porch, cups of tea between them, gleefully gossiping about the neighbors. These days, Martha stared out of the window from inside a nursing home, and never said a word.

Rita's eyes went misty. "It doesn't matter how many years I have lived, Henry, life is always hard when it takes a turn."

"I know. Believe me, I know."

"Goodnight," Max called out to the others who were slowly departing, bidding each other well until the next time. He stopped and placed a hand on my shoulder.

"I'll email you, Henry," he said lightly; I knew he was referring to the invoice for tonight's session.

"Great! See you in two weeks," I said.

He looked as though he wanted to say something more, but then he just smiled and followed the others out into the cool Everston evening.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, startling me.

> Henry, sorry to take so long. Had trouble sourcing piping. Can get shipment in a few weeks. Sorry, big job at the old house off Ducks Crossing Road taking up my time. Kyle

A shipment in a few weeks? How was I going to last that long? I was busy trying to find a polite way to ask Kyle if he could bump the library up the priority list when Bobby distracted me.

"Hey, Henry, are we meeting at Brandy's or at the library next time?"

"Here," I said, sighing softly. "But we'll be back at the library in no time . . . I hope."

The stragglers disappeared into the night and I returned the stools to their original places.

"I could have packed those away. Come have a drink," Sasha said from behind the bar.

I leaned on the oak. It was getting late, but I wouldn't turn down a drink. Sasha clinked down two tumblers in front of us and poured us each a glass of brandy.

"You look like hell, Briggs," she said.

"I feel like hell," I said, raising my tumbler to Sasha and taking a burning sip.

"You think it helps, all that talking?"

"Well, I think the alternative, at least for most of us, would be much worse."

"You know, a little birdie told me that the library pays for these sessions because it received some sort of mental health initiative from the state," Sasha said, arching an eyebrow. "How very generous of the government."

I sighed, swirling the last of my brandy in the glass. "Was the little birdie Gill?"

"Sure was. On a pension, having free grief counseling sessions goes a long way," she replied, her voice light but her expression sharp. "Although, really, does anything in this world come for free?"

I froze. *Busted.*

"Please don't say anything," I muttered, avoiding her gaze.

Sasha shook her head. "I would never. I think it's honorable what you're doing, Henry. Truly. But I am worried about you. Six people in the group already, and you're talking about adding more? That's a lot to take on. And let's be honest, librarians aren't exactly rolling in cash."

I managed a small smile and finished my brandy, setting the glass down with a quiet clink.

"Thanks for the drink, Sasha. And the space."

With that, I said no more, leaving Sasha staring after me, her concern etched into every line of her face. She didn't understand, and maybe she never would. This wasn't just about generosity or kindness—it was something I *had* to do. I couldn't save Jacob. I couldn't stop the cancer, no matter how many specialists I called, how many treatments we tried, or how much money I spent. But I *could* save this group. I could make sure no one felt alone, no one felt like they had to carry the grief in silence. Hiring Max and hosting small sessions in the library had worked for these people. If the sessions weren't "free," most of them wouldn't come, and how could they? Gill's pension barely covered his rent at the retirement home. Rita's savings went into her sister's care. Emerson and her mom were drowning in medical bills. If there were a price tag, they'd walk away. I felt like I was doing something, and I wanted to do more: welcome more people, create more groups with other counselors. But the truth was, even I had limits. My life savings wouldn't last forever. I needed a plan and, though it wasn't fully formed, I was working on it. I'd have to convince this group of people, who already found talking about their grief almost impossible, to share their stories with strangers. It wouldn't be easy, but if I could convince them, it could mean a future for these sessions. A future for them—and maybe, in some way, a future for me too.