

The Charmed Library

A Novel

HARPER
MUSE

JENNIFER MOORMAN



The Charmed Library

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To you, the one who's always wanted to have a slumber party in the library and magic your favorite fictional character out of a book. I'll bring the snacks.



“I almost wish I hadn’t gone down that rabbit-hole—and yet—and yet—it’s rather curious, you know, this sort of life!”

—Alice from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*



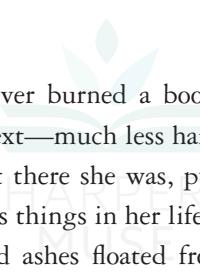
The only thing that you absolutely have to know,
is the location of the library.

—Albert Einstein





Prologue

Stella Parker had never burned a book in her life. Had never once thrown pages of text—much less handwritten love letters and poetry—into a fire. Yet there she was, purposefully setting fire to one of the most precious things in her life: words.

Wisps of smoke and ashes floated from the ancient flue on a blistering Saturday early-evening breeze. The haze rounded corners, spiraled up tree trunks along the Main Street sidewalk, and lingered in pockets of shadow. The townsfolk in Blue Sky Valley, North Carolina, stumbled into the ashy air unexpectedly and were overcome with longing. Many were compelled to hurry home and hug someone or to buy a journal and write down their thoughts. Some wandered out into the mature pine forest until the soothing sounds of birds and the soft green blanket of grass beneath their feet helped lessen the ache. None were aware of *why* they felt the unusual emotions or that their peace came at the cost of Stella's heartache.

Deep inside the town's library, where dust mites danced in the slanted light and the walls hummed with the energy of a million sto-

JENNIFER MOORMAN

ries, the words Stella sacrificed did not simply vanish—they would always belong to this town, to its magic, to the unseen force that wove Blue Sky Valley together. As the ashes faded into the dusk, the library listened, waiting, knowing that every story—especially the ones set free—would find its way home.



Chapter 1

*B*rilliant orange flames separated inside the decades-old furnace as Stella stared, mesmerized. The fire burned hot at its core, blackening the edges of the paper and ravenously consuming everything within its steel walls. Stella, frustrated and tired of her own heartache, waited for the pressure to release from her solar plexus—that spot just below her rib cage that ached every time something was *wrong*. But so far, the discomfort had only intensified.

Even as she watched her journal burn, along with every word she'd written over the past few months, her fingers itched to record this event, to detail the way the ink-stained pages writhed in the flames, the way flecks of paper lifted on pops of air and danced before shriveling.

Guilt planted a seed deep in her belly and started to grow something thorny and tangled. Her stomach clenched when three golden, shimmering words rose from the flames and slid out the open mouth of the furnace. They glittered against the black metal like stars in a midnight sky. **Surrender. Anew. Forgiveness.**

Was the journal forgiving her? Or were the words telling her she needed to extend forgiveness? But to whom? Not *him*. No way did he deserve her forgiveness. The lines between Stella's brows deepened. Didn't surrender mean *giving up*? What was left to give up? As if life hadn't asked her to give up too much already. The glowing words dissipated into the darkness of the basement.

There would always be another journal to fill. Because there would never be enough paper, enough *space*, to release all the words clawing, springing, secreting their way out of her. There would never be an end to smears of ink on her fingers or the phrases that trailed up the walls. She would forever see words slinking across floors and slipping into her room at night like best friends intent on keeping her company.

For as long as she could remember, Stella had seen words the same way someone might spot a bird or watch a dragonfly zipping through cattails. She saw words everywhere. Ever since she'd received her first pack of crayons, she'd been crowding white spaces with all the words pressing in on her heart. Stella captured words and poems and catalogued them in journals. She drew word maps in colored ink in her diaries and added special captions to photographs when words floated over images in a family album. She jotted down people's names and the words that followed them like beloved pets. She made notes about places around town and all the words living there, even the haunted ones she sometimes saw ghosting around. Words like *eerie*, *bewitched*, and *phantasmic*.

When Stella was a child, her mother had encouraged her to share the words, insisting her talent was a fantastical gift that would guide Stella toward her dreams. Desiring the special attention and wanting to please her mother, Stella kept, wrote, and cherished the words. But after her mother was gone, the idea that the words could lead Stella to her dreams seemed like a terrible joke. In what dreams

did mothers leave? She tried to ignore the words. She wanted to refuse their neediness to be caught and loved.

But Stella quickly realized she didn't have a choice. She couldn't neglect the words. She couldn't stop their appearance or keep them housed inside her. Some days the words felt like a swarm of agitated bees living in her body, and to release their fury, she had to write. She worried she might implode if she didn't free them, if she didn't give them new life on the page. What if she kept them trapped inside and then suffocated beneath their creative weight?

Some days the words were delicate and soft like goose feathers floating through her. On those days she felt light and joyful, and her pen flowed across the pages like water easing down a river. She learned to pay just enough attention to the words to catalog them with the hope that they would eventually stop showing up when she grew up.

That had yet to happen, and today irritation stung her. Why hadn't setting fire to her past—literally—soothed her? Why couldn't she burn the words, the *emotions*, as easily as the flames destroyed the paper?

Maybe she was being dramatic. That was what her older brother, Percy, would say in his easy teasing way, but there was probably a whole lot of truth laced through his jokes. Where Stella was emotional, Percy was even-keeled. Where she was paralyzed some days by the frantic beating of her own heart, Percy appeared perpetually calm and peaceful.

The fire crackled, and Wade Haynes' smiling face lurked in her mind. Her jaw clenched. The last time she'd seen him was when he walked out of her apartment six months ago, leaving behind a stifling feeling of failure, a fast-food receipt stained with the greasy fingerprints of his children, and two simple, charred-black words: *passing time*. She'd been all-in with that relationship, believing

JENNIFER MOORMAN

they were both in love. But his walking away and never contacting her again proved she couldn't have been more wrong. The truth that he'd simply been *passing time* with her filled her with shame and fury.

The rejection still pricked like she'd eaten stinging nettles. Stella had filled a journal full of letters and poems she would never send, *couldn't* send to Wade. Now, months later, on the anniversary of their first date, two cups of overly sweet coffee churned in her belly. She knelt in front of the wood-burning furnace in the library's basement and tested Ray Bradbury's temperature hypothesis. Did paper catch fire at 451 degrees Fahrenheit? How could she even prove the author's statement? The antique thermometer gauge didn't register above two-hundred-fifty degrees. The more important hypothesis was: Would setting fire to words inspired by Wade set her free?

The answer was no.

She wanted to burn Wade's memory from her heart, turn it all to ashes she could sweep up and dump into the garbage. But instead, a memory of Wade and her laughing surfaced. Followed by the memory of the afternoon she met him at the state park and he'd taken her in his arms and spun her around. Then the day he'd tried to waltz with her in the art gallery and they'd almost knocked over a porcelain vase. Next, the time they went to the movies, sat in the back row like teenagers, and he couldn't stop kissing her. Then the day he'd texted her ten different haikus about his love for her and how they'd be connected forever.

"Enough!" she spat and squeezed her eyes closed as if that would stop the barrage. Her shoulders slumped. She and Wade had been happy. *Really* happy—until they weren't.

Stella glanced at the furnace. Words and books were some of the few things that understood her. How many times had she wished to disappear into a novel? Would the thousands of books in the library above her now chant *murderer*? Would she walk the gauntlet of their

disapproval, their condemnation? Warm tears of frustration left wet tracks on her cheeks. Tears heavy with sorrow splattered on the floor, and the ground trembled beneath her feet, sending out waves of disappointment.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered as the thin journal cover shriveled in the furnace.

A sheet of paper, charred and brittle around the edges, lifted on a wave of heat and floated out of the furnace opening. Stella pinched it between two fingers. Burns like bullet holes marred some of the words, but she had memorized the poem.

*The sky was endless,
the silence deep.
The sun dropped into the trees
and I never once tried to stop it,
only watched and shivered
in the wind,
in the absence of you.
I love you with a love
that wounds.
Reckless, stubborn, willful.
I rug my ribs,
thank them for caging my heart
or else I’d never have control of it,
if I ever do.
I love you with a love
that overcomes me
like the tide,
rushing away,
stealing everything from my grasp,
even you.*

JENNIFER MOORMAN

Stella sighed. Blackened paper crumbled around the edges and fell toward the floor like dying butterflies. She kneeled in front of the furnace, sailed the poem back into the flames, and watched it burn to ash.

The basement door at the top of the stairs opened, sending golden light down the steps, highlighting the worn treads. “Stella?”

She jumped to her feet, swiped at her wet cheeks, and slammed the furnace door shut, singeing the skin on her fingertips. The fire hissed and swelled inside its metal cage. She shook out her hand, trying to cool her fingers, and winced. “Be right up,” she called.

The first few steps creaked as Arnold Cohen, the head librarian, descended halfway. “Should I ask why you’re using the furnace? Don’t look so shocked. A few of the windows are open, and it looks like I have a fog machine going upstairs in the historical stacks.”

Stella glanced over her shoulder at the furnace before meeting Arnie at the staircase. She cleared her throat. “I was testing hypotheses.”

His thick, graying eyebrows lifted. “And?”

Stella gripped the handrail and tugged herself up the first few steps. The old wood groaned in resonance with her heart. “The results are disappointing.”

Behind his glasses, Arnie’s dark, deep-set eyes watched her, studied her. “You can’t burn away the past.”

She squeezed the railing harder. The nape of her neck tingled as though embers clung to her skin. Her exhalation shuddered in the space between them, rippling through the air. “I wish I had a shovel to dig it out then.”

“If you could have taken the easy way, what would you have learned? Nothing.”

Stella scowled. “And what have I learned, Arnie?”

“How to handle your heart differently next time.” Arnie turned

THE CHARMED LIBRARY

and ascended the stairs. “It didn’t escape me that you carried your journal down here and yet you’re not returning with it. I assume you want me to keep it a secret from the books upstairs that you tossed one of their brethren to the flames.”

Stella followed him up and switched off the basement light. A flickering glow quivered across the darkened concrete floor and caught her attention. Words formed in the cavorting shadows. **Goodbye. Forget. Next time.** There would be no *next time* for how to handle her heart; as far as she was concerned, her heart was a dead, useless thing taking up space in her chest. She closed and locked the basement door.



STELLA HAD OPENED the Blue Sky Valley Public Library that morning, having no idea that she’d sneak away that afternoon to burn her journal. Just after lunch, a visitor had wandered in.

The older woman, probably in her mid-sixties, had approached Stella at the circulation desk. She was looking for a self-help book, specifically one covering the topic of releasing the past. When they arrived at the section, Stella pointed out a few books that might be of interest, but the woman didn’t say anything for a moment.

“Is there anything else I can help you with?” Stella asked, sensing the woman’s hesitation.

Her tears surprised Stella, but not as much as her words. “Don’t do what I did.”

Such a broad declaration that included a world of options. The woman could be encouraging Stella not to wear orange lipstick as much as she could mean don’t rob the local bank.

She continued, “Don’t spend your life re-creating the past. He ran out on me twenty years ago for ‘the love of his life,’ and do you

JENNIFER MOORMAN

know how I've spent those same twenty years?" Stella shook her head. "Angry, bitter, you name it. Now look at me!" Her voice rose above an acceptable library level. "Shriveled, that's what I am."

She wiped at her tears and forced a smile that looked more pained than natural. She pulled one of the self-help books from the shelf and smoothed her hand across its cover. "I'm on a road trip to find myself. I didn't realize until an hour ago that I had been taking him with me everywhere, holding what he did to me inside my body like a terrible disease. Reliving my past over and over again. He's been riding in the passenger seat this whole time. Metaphorically, of course."

The woman patted Stella's arm. "Listen to me, going on like I've lost it. Well, I plan to lose *him*, which is why I'm here and why I'm going to start with this book." She held out the choice to Stella. "Don't do what I did. Don't hold on to things that hurt you."

The woman's words echoed through Stella's mind long after she'd checked out the book and left the library. It wasn't until late afternoon when Stella consciously realized that she had the journal in her purse, which forced her to admit that she'd been carrying the memory of Wade around with her *for months*. Like an albatross around her neck.

Would she still be hung up on Wade twenty years from now? That question fueled her to burn the journal and attempt to burn Wade's memory along with it. She'd only half succeeded and was left with a growing sense of remorse.

There was no reason to stay until the library closed tonight. Arnie tried to send her home early. Only two people had come in during the late afternoon, and each stayed less than an hour. With no special activities happening that evening, Arnie could have handled the closing routine alone, but Stella wasn't in the mood to go home and sit.

THE CHARMED LIBRARY

Because she wouldn't just sit; she'd fester about why she hadn't been able to incinerate Wade's memory from her heart. Next the guilt, possibly coupled with regret, would creep in about the burned journal. No, she'd rather go home after staying at the library as long as possible and then face-plant on her bed without thinking at all.

After working alongside Arnie as his library assistant for the past four years, the few nighttime procedures went quickly. At nine p.m. Stella said good night to Arnie, grabbed an armful of books she planned on reading during the next two weeks, and carried them to the rear parking lot. A creature of habit, Stella parked her car in the same spot every day. First row, fourth space, to the right of the library's exit.

This spot was covered in afternoon shade, thanks to a hundred-year-old oak tree, that kept her leather car seats from feeling like molten lava after sitting outside all day in the Southern heat. Years ago, the local Lions Club championed for the mature tree not to be harmed when the city paved the library's parking lot. The grand oak now grew out of an open circle in the black asphalt, and over time its enormous roots buckled and cracked the pavement like an overcooked hotdog, creating natural speed bumps throughout the lot.

As she walked to her car, Stella hopped over words that slipped out of the pavement's cracks. *Uno, due, tre, quattro, cinque*. She glanced at the book on top of her stack, an English–Italian dictionary. Her newest quest was to learn enough Italian that she could read Michelangelo's *Rime* in its original language. So far, she could count to ten, say a few casual greetings, and order *gelato al pistacchio*. Basically a vocabulary far outmatched by an Italian preschooler.

She placed the books in the passenger seat and drove in silence through downtown. Not much had changed in Blue Sky Valley since she was a kid, and tonight, its predictable routine comforted her. Many of the town's lights winked out one by one as she drove.

JENNIFER MOORMAN

Some shop owners put their businesses to bed for the night, flipping around Closed signs and switching off interior lamps. Other businesses turned on lights, calling forth those interested in the nightlife, which was far from wild in a small town like this. There wasn't much to do in the historic downtown area other than find consolation in the corner pub or dine at Bruno's Café.

Just on the edge of the town center was the theater that had room enough to show two movies only. Currently they were playing flashbacks—*Grease* and *Jaws*—and selling double feature tickets if someone wanted to first enjoy the summer nights with romance and then follow it up with being terrified to swim in the ocean.

Stella pulled into the shadowed driveway of her childhood home and pressed a button on the garage door opener attached to the visor. The aluminum door groaned as it lifted and revealed the almost-empty interior meant for two cars. She parked in the middle and then shuffled to the mailbox. All of today's mail was junk, but three different Realtor postcards were part of the stack. One had a note scribbled on it in blue ink. *Stella, Percy said you were ready to sell. Call me! Anita.*

Stella ripped the postcard in half and then dumped all the mail into the outside trash bin. She was tempted to call Percy and tell him to back off, but that would require a conversation she didn't have the energy for. She lowered the garage door behind her. Leaning into her open car door, she wrangled the stack of books from the passenger seat.

As she unlocked the house-to-garage door, she wondered for the umpteenth time why she bothered to lock a door that was secured behind a garage door no human could manually open from the outside. She knew this to be true because during a power outage last month, her car had been trapped in the garage. Not even YouTube how-to videos could help her figure out how to lift the metal door

THE CHARMED LIBRARY

when the pull cord was stuck. She hadn't been strong enough to tug it free, and since she lived alone, there was no one to help her. A peal of loneliness echoed through her now.

Stella dropped the books on the kitchen counter. "Hello, house," she said as she flipped on the hallway light. Her cell phone dinged, alerting her to a message from her best friend, Ariel. She grabbed a pencil from the kitchen counter, twirled her dark curls into a messy bun, and stabbed the pencil into her hair to hold it in place.

Ariel had moved to Blue Sky Valley, down the street from Stella on Magnolia Drive, when they were in fourth grade. Ariel introduced herself that very first day, and Stella knew they'd be fast friends. With airy words like **hope**, **enchantment**, and **stardust** floating around Ariel like confetti, how could anyone not gravitate toward her? Stella certainly had.

She grabbed the library books and carried them into the living room and debated whether she should tell Ariel about burning the journal. Just thinking about it caused her stomach to ache. But if anyone would understand, it was Ariel, who'd been by Stella's side through every celebration and every heartache since they were nine years old.

Stella opened Ariel's text: The first customer of the morning asked if I could dye her poodle red and cut her to look like Elmo. How do you cut a poodle to look like Elmo, I ask. She shows me a YouTube video that I can't unsee. How was your day? What's on the schedule tomorrow?

Stella smiled for the first time in hours, then texted: Tell me you said yes. Send photos. I'm about a solid 6 today on the scale of life. What would it be like to be a ten on life's enjoyment scale? What would she give to be free of the heaviness, to find her way to *real* love and joy? She continued: Tomorrow's library events include adventure club and maybe the knitting club. What's on tomorrow's agenda for

you? Dogs groomed like dromedary camels?

Ariel replied: I did not agree to Elmo. That would have been a total dog-tastrophe. Nor would I agree to camels, although I could be bribed with the right gift. When are you gonna learn to knit so I can sell dog sweaters on the side? Breakfast tomorrow? I can pick you up in my sweet ride.

Stella laughed. The veterinary hospital had invested in a mobile dog grooming unit, and Ariel, the local dog groomer, drove it all over town and the surrounding towns six days a week. It put smiles on faces to see the neon-pink Fur Real Dog Grooming van drive by. The horn even sounded like a dog bark. Stella texted that she'd love to have breakfast, and they set a time for Ariel to swing by the library and pick her up.

Stella placed her phone on the counter, but it dinged again. Ariel again. Want to talk about why you're a 6 today? I've been told I'm THE BEST listener.

Just knowing Ariel cared and wanted to listen eased the ache inside Stella, but she didn't know how to articulate what she was feeling, so she replied: Thanks, but we can chat tomorrow. ❤

Stella opened the refrigerator, which was shockingly bare, and what little it did have wasn't snack-worthy. Suddenly, a burning sensation started in her heart, like a sparkler shoved straight through her chest. She released the refrigerator door and sidestepped, pressing a hand to her heart and leaning over in pain. Was this horrendous heartburn? A heart attack? A vision of the burning journal flared to life in her mind. In a panic, she thought, *Is this because I burned the words? Am I being punished?* The intensity scalded her insides and pushed "Dear Lord" from her lips.

In a moment that could have been ripped from a *Ghostbusters* movie, what looked like violet fluid struggled to rise from a kitchen tile, but once it fully emerged, it formed a group of words. Pulsat-

ing letters, dark plum in the center and pale lavender toward the edges. Undulating tendrils, like the roots of a plant, hung from the letters as if they'd been dug out of a magical garden. The words trembled across the floor near her feet.

"I fell in," she muttered, and instantly the burning in her chest subsided. Stella inhaled a deep breath and stood straight. The words rushed across the floor, up the bottom row of kitchen cabinets, and over the countertop until they wrapped around a purple pen near one of her half-used journals and then disappeared.

Stunned and slightly frightened, Stella stared at the pen and massaged her fingers into her chest. The words had never been so demanding, never so forceful. She'd also never seen words appear that way before. These were different, more alive, more substantial than they'd ever been.

Stella walked to the purple pen and opened the journal to a blank page. She didn't need to question what the words wanted. They *wanted* to be written down. But why? What did the words mean? At the top of a clean page, she wrote, *I fell in*.

Fell in what? Stella thought of a dozen things she'd fallen into over the past year. Despair, hopelessness, faux love. She'd also fallen into books, into fits of laughter with Ariel, and into silence at the sight of a sunset.

She stared at the purple words on the page, a crease forming between her brows. A shiver ran up her arms as she closed the journal. Part of her wanted to shrug off this new experience with her beloved words, to say it was no big deal. But she placed a hand over her heart and knew they were no ordinary words. They had an agenda . . . One that might burn a hole right through her.

Chapter 2

*S*leeping peacefully wasn't in the scope of possibilities for Stella, not after the blistering eruption of purple words demanded her attention in a way that frightened her. When she was younger, Stella saw words every day, especially when her mother was still with them. As she'd grown, they slowed to appear a few times a week. But never, in all her years of word spotting, had *any* of them felt like last night. She desperately wished the purple-words experience was an anomaly, a freak occurrence.

But she had doubts—a truckload of them. Mainly because the words *I fell in* meant nothing to her, which led her to believe there was more . . . More what? She didn't know. The idea of more words accompanied by more pain bred trepidation within her.

At ten the next morning Stella dragged herself down the wide, concrete library entrance stairs, masking a yawn behind her hand. A pink van idled at the curb. Ariel waved at her through the window. A group of kids walking up the sidewalk made hand signals for Ariel to press the horn. She obliged, and the kids burst into laughter

at the artificial dog woofing. Oh to be young, rested, and joyful.

Stella opened the passenger door and hauled herself up into the cab. This month Ariel had a stripe of fuchsia dye ribboning through her blond ponytail. Last month it was sherbet orange, and the month before had been aqua, but only the hair underneath the top layer. Ariel's fresh face was makeup free with a tinted sunscreen to protect her fair complexion. A scattering of tan freckles connecting on the bridge of her button nose trailed along both cheeks. She looked rested, an obvious contrast to Stella's exhausted state.

"Thanks for picking me up." Stella wrinkled her nose at the smell of shampoo and cooked pork. "Why does it smell like—"

"Bacon? Delicious buttery biscuits?" Ariel finished. She reached behind her head to a built-in metal shelf and retrieved an oversize white paper sack. She handed the bag to Stella. The bottom was still warm.

"I swung by the diner and grabbed breakfast for us. You know how packed it is on Sundays, so I thought we could drive to the park but dine in so we can enjoy the AC. At first I considered a quick morning picnic, but—"

"It's June and definitely too hot?" Stella said.

"Like swampy hot," Ariel agreed. "You should see the line at Frost Bites."

Stella buckled her seat belt. "It's probably a mile long."

"At least two miles, and it's not even lunchtime." Ariel shifted the van into Drive. "Can you imagine what July and August will feel like?"

Stella nodded. "Like walking on the sun."

"Barefoot." Ariel slipped on a pair of oversize silver sunglasses and turned up the radio. "Under the Boardwalk" blasted on the oldies station, and Ariel belted out the tune as the van wound its way through town toward the city park. She glanced over at Stella.

“You’re not singing. Why aren’t you singing? We love this song.”

Stella yawned again and shrugged. “You take the solo today.”

Once they were parked and gazing out over a vibrant-green swath of grass and mature oak trees, Stella unpacked the bag on the dashboard. There was an egg white, kale, and tomato biscuit for Ariel and a bacon, egg, and cheese biscuit for Stella. Ariel had also ordered extra biscuits to share. Stella divided the wad of flimsy brown napkins and unwrapped her biscuit.

“I didn’t think to ask for plates,” Ariel said, folding down the paper wrapped around her biscuit.

Stella waved off the idea that they needed a fancier setup. “Just more trash to bother with. How’s your morning been? Any outrageous requests?”

Ariel covered her mouth and half chewed, half laughed. “Pretty tame morning. I had an early wash and trim first thing over in Willow Lake, and after this little break with you, my day is jam-packed. I’m counting on this breakfast to hold me over through the afternoon.”

“You need me to bring you lunch?” Stella asked. “I don’t mind, and Arnie won’t care if I cut out for a bit.”

Ariel shook her head, and her moonstone earrings swayed. “Nah, but thanks. I’d rather push through and then take a longer dinner break to eat without stressing about running behind.”

They ate in silence for a few beats. Stella’s mind drifted to last night’s words, and she rubbed a ghost ache from her collarbone. She couldn’t work out what any of it meant by overthinking, but that didn’t stop her brain from darting all over in an attempt to solve the mystery.

As she bit into the biscuit, her mind refocused on breakfast. The local diner, Grits & Gravy, baked the absolute best biscuits in the world, and Stella would debate this with anyone, knowing she’d

win. Unlike stereotype diners that were grease pits, Grits & Gravy was anything but a sloppy, grease-filled locale. The food was an unusual combination of comforting and sophisticated. The menu was filled with homey favorites, but all the ingredients were fresh and food was cooked to order, elevating the usual diner fare.

The buttery biscuit had a crunch on the bottom with a soft, pillow-y, layered center, and Stella couldn't imagine anything more perfect to sandwich between it than her favorite breakfast combo: bacon, eggs, and melted American cheese.

"These biscuits are everything," she said.

Ariel nodded. "Divinely inspired."

"Mind-blowing."

Ariel lifted her hand and waved in the air. "Miraculous."

Stella laughed. "You win."

Ariel poked the last bite into her mouth. "These biscuits win."

Stella glanced out the passenger-side window. A young man tossed an orange frisbee to an overly eager border collie. A jogger ran by on the trail that wound through the park. Just thinking about going for a run exaggerated Stella's fatigue. She reached for a napkin and wiped a blob of cheese from the corner of her mouth.

Ariel cleared her throat and turned down the radio's volume. "Maybe I'm wrong, but you seem a bit off today. I'm also interested in why you were a six yesterday. Does it have something to do with why you're giving off a muddy vibe today?"

Stella paused, confused by the statement and wondering if somehow Ariel knew about the purple words. Then she remembered their texts last night. "Oh . . . it's nothing worth talking about."

Ariel pointed at Stella's face. "You have the worst poker face. Actually, you have *no* poker face. As you said the words, your facial expression drooped and you got sad eyes."

Stella tried to look offended, but she wasn't. Ariel knew all of

her expressions and diversion tactics. She finished her biscuit, then took a slow inhale. “Muddy vibe? Sounds gross, which is probably accurate. I didn’t sleep well.”

“Any particular reason?”

Stella nodded. Multiple reasons, but she wasn’t ready to talk about the words yet. “I burned a journal yesterday.”

Ariel’s eyebrows rose dramatically. “Like some kind of ritual? I know people burn candles and papers with messages on them to release bad energy or to cut energy cords, but you? You burned a *book*? You don’t even dog-ear the pages.” Ariel glanced out the window. “Have we slipped into an alternate universe? What was in the journal? Symbolic writings?”

Stella held up a hand, her buttery fingertips reflecting the sunlight. “Whoa, that got real woo-woo real fast. A ritual, seriously? What kind of ritual would *I* be doing? No, it was everything I’d been writing for and about Wade during the past six months. I’m over it. I’m tired of feeling connected to him, so I burned the journal in the library’s furnace.”

Ariel twisted off the cap on her water bottle and took a long drink before responding. “That’s kinda like a ritual. You were hoping to sever your connection by burning everything you wrote about him.”

Stella shrugged and wiped her fingers on a napkin. “All those words . . . burned.” *Lost forever*. And yet she still felt every one of the words vibrating inside her. Burning the journal hadn’t erased what happened from her heart. She thought of the golden words that slipped out of the furnace. **Surrender. Anew. Forgiveness.** Maybe she should start a new journal, write those three words at the top of a clean page. But that didn’t *feel* like what she was supposed to glean from them. Understanding what the words meant and how they were connected to her life had never been as confusing as the

past two days.

“How do you feel now?”

“Confused,” Stella admitted.

“Should I assume by you being a six last night that it didn’t go as planned?” Ariel asked.

Stella opened her own water bottle and took a drink. “Why can’t I get over him?”

Ariel cut her gaze over to Stella and pursed her lips. Then she toyed with the turquoise pendant hanging from her necklace. “Because you don’t want to.”

Stella choked when she tried to swallow. Drops of water dribbled from her mouth. “What?” she squawked. “Why would you say that?” She wiped her mouth with a thin napkin, tearing it in her roughness.

Ariel inhaled a slow breath and then pinned her Caribbean-blue eyes on Stella. “Now don’t get mad, but if you wanted to let it go, you would. There might be a bit of bitterness lingering inside you. I can help you get it out—”

Stella bristled. “I’m not bitter!” Then she immediately flushed with embarrassment and sagged against the seat. She thought about the older woman visiting the library yesterday—she’d been bitter for twenty years. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t yell at you. I didn’t sleep much last night.”

Ariel’s understanding smile sent a wash of guilt over Stella. “For what it’s worth, I think burning the journal was brave. It shows you’re *trying* to let go, and that’s something. You’ve been through a lot in the past four years. Leaving Memphis, losing your dad, moving home, and then spending a year with Wade, hoping he’d come through, only to realize he was . . .”

“Stringing me along the whole time? Using me and lying to me? Making me believe love was real?”

Ariel gazed out at the park as sunlight glinted off the hood of the van. “I wouldn’t describe it exactly that way, but yeah. It’s no wonder you’ve been angry and clutching reasons to stay that way.”

Was she holding on to Wade . . . on purpose? The idea made her insides squirm. Being with Wade had made Stella feel alive and seen. While he hadn’t been as interested in books, he’d willingly listened to her prattle on about them. He’d also praised Stella’s creativity and encouraged her to write, not just in her journals, but poetry and short stories. He’d even written poetry for her. It was lousy, for sure, but it had charmed her.

The memories shot heat into her cheeks, followed by a burst of anger. Why had he bothered showering her with so much love and attention if he never planned to follow through with his promises? Stella had tucked those stupid poems into the journal, which was now a pile of ash.

Desperately needing to divert her thoughts from her ex, she glanced over at Ariel and noticed flower-shaped words spiraling around her best friend’s throat like a daisy-chain necklace. **Intrigued. Romantic pursuits. Ask me out.** “Are you dating someone?”

Ariel shot a look at Stella, and her eyes narrowed. “Are you using your word magic on me?”

Stella laughed. “Are you admitting I’m right?”

Ariel sighed dramatically. “No, but I’d like to be. He’s a client, though, so I don’t know how it would work.”

Stella’s mouth dropped open. “Wait, you’d like to be dating one of your dogs?”

Ariel realized her mistake and giggled. “Wrong word. He’s a *customer*. He brings in his German shepherd, Scout. He named her after a character from one of his favorite books.”

“*To Kill a Mockingbird?*”

Ariel nodded.

“You should probably marry him. A book nerd is a solid choice.”

Ariel scrunched her face. “Marry him? I’m not even sure we can make a date happen. He’s really cute and nice, and he’s not wearing a wedding band, but I have no idea if he’s dating anyone. Plus, some married men don’t wear rings. And it’s not like I can slide that in without being awkward. ‘Hey, a regular shampoo and cut for Scout, and are you single?’ There’s just not a way to segue there.”

“You have his name and number,” Stella said with a sly smile. “You could call him and ask him out.”

Ariel gasped. “Not happening. I’d prefer it to be more organic and not force it.”

Stella smirked. “You mean you’d prefer he do the asking.”

Ariel reached for another biscuit. “Exactly. Want half?”

Stella nodded, and Ariel split the biscuit down the middle, handing the larger half to Stella. They sat in silence for a few moments eating.

Stella replayed tossing the journal into the fire with hope that it would free her from the connection with Wade, but if anything, she felt worse. Then she thought of the violet words that ripped an ache through her chest last night: *I fell in*. Did the words have something to do with Wade?

“You know what I love most about fairy tales?” Stella asked.

“The jewels? The crowns? Having your own princess castle?”

Stella chuckled. “All great guesses, but I love how you always know who the bad guy is in fairy tales. He’s easy to recognize because he’s probably wearing black or a wild cape or has arched eyebrows and an evil gleam in his eyes. But here in our world, the bad guy sometimes looks like Prince Charming, and he’s charismatic, intelligent, funny, and has the perfect smile. Sometimes you think you’ve found the prince, but he’s actually the villain.” She paused.

“Do you really think I’m the problem here with Wade?”

Ariel finished her half of the biscuit and wiped her mouth. “Honest thoughts?”

Stella braced herself and nodded.

“I’m not saying he didn’t have bad vibes and that he’s not at fault. He didn’t treat you well, that’s obvious. And the way he left you was cruel in my opinion. But now after all these months, we can see that him being gone and not contacting you is an indicator that you don’t need his kind of energy in your life. So it’s a gift, really, and if you’re still angry about it or still feeling mopey about losing him, then maybe it’s because you want to keep holding on and being angry and sad.”

Stella frowned. “Why would anyone want that?”

Sadness drifted across Ariel’s face. “That’s a good question.”



THE REST OF the day at the library passed slower than chilled cane syrup. On incredibly slow days, Stella normally dusted books, trying not to inhale the filth and microscopic debris collecting in crevices, which wasn’t as easy as it sounded. Breathing in at the wrong time could mean you sucked in a throatful of dank, dusty particles and spent the rest of the day sneezing with watery eyes.

Instead, she ran a report to see which books hadn’t been checked out recently. Sometimes books hid amid the library shelves and weren’t checked out for years. Last week she found a book that hadn’t left the library since February 1988. Books like that had to be weeded out, a twinging liberation. Stella cringed at the idea of getting rid of books, but space in the library was precious, and how could they make room for new books if they never weeded out the ones that had frozen in place?

Thankfully she and Arnie had creative ways of finding homes for the weeded titles. They advertised for people to come pick through the free books or sold books for fundraisers both for the library and other local activities. It amazed Stella how a book could have sat on a shelf for a year with no interest, yet it might be the first one snagged in a giveaway. She imagined the rehomed books trembling with excitement on their way to being loved and enjoyed again after feeling forgotten for so long.

After a few hours of weeding, Stella leaned her head against the edge of a shelf. When she closed her eyes, Ariel's voice sounded in her mind. Discomfort spread an ache to her chest area, giving her a feeling of indigestion. Could heartburn *literally* make her heart ache? Or was it just the bacon from this morning?

After all these months, how was it possible that she still had heart spasms because of Wade? Their time together was limited, with this demanding job and caring for his kids, every time they'd seen each other felt exciting. The way he hugged her like he never wanted to let go. The way they snickered like there was always a secret they couldn't wait to share. She *missed* feeling buoyant, missed the anticipation of the next kiss. Why was it easier to remember the heart-lifting moments and ignore the truth?

Shame burned through her. Wade was long gone and the only thing stopping her from truly letting him go was her. She rubbed her fingers against her breastbone. Ariel would say that Stella's heart chakra was out of alignment or needed "to be cleansed." A defibrillator box hung on a nearby wall. Could the paddles shock all the gunk from her heart, including stubborn emotions that she may or may not be allowing to linger? She could hear Ariel's voice in her head: *That is most definitely not the proper way to cleanse your heart.*

Fire hadn't worked. Lightning wasn't going to fix her. So what would? Ariel would say to try meditating and breathing. Breathing

she could do, but Stella meditated about as well as she spoke Italian. In fits and starts. Poorly.

“Hey, kiddo,” Arnie said, startling her from her thoughts. “The knitting club rescheduled. Why don’t you call it a night? You look beat.”

“Thanks, Arnie,” Stella said with a sigh. “Just what a girl wants to hear.”

“I thought women wanted honesty,” he teased.

“Pfft,” she said. “Who told you that nonsense?” He slipped his arm around her shoulders and gave her a squeeze. “I know what you mean. I do feel a bit worn down. I’ll take you up on that offer and head home”—she glanced at her cell phone—“Half an hour early. You sure you can close up without me?”

His expression said, *Are you kidding me?* “Is a heffalump pink?”

“Does a woozle leave tracks in the snow?” she countered.

Arnie smiled at her. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Stella grabbed her keys from the counter where she’d tossed them earlier and walked to her car parked behind the library in the first row, fourth space, to the right of the library’s exit. Same as always. She drove through town with a persistent burn in her chest and wondered if she had any antacids at home. After pulling into the garage, she grabbed for her purse, but it wasn’t there. She stared in confusion for a moment, then checked the floorboard and the narrow area between the passenger seat and the car door—as if it would even fit there. Her searching fingers found a pen, a rubber band, and a lonely, fragile cheese puff. She climbed out of the car to give herself a different vantage point but fisted her hands on her hips. Nothing but cracking leather seats. She retraced her steps in her mind and saw her purse sitting beneath the circulation desk. It would take her less than fifteen minutes to drive back across town and grab it.

THE CHARMED LIBRARY

She called Arnie as she drove. Thankfully she kept her cell phone with her while she worked. When he didn't answer, she left a message. Even though the library's rear parking lot was empty when she returned, Stella parked in her usual spot.

On the lot beside the library sat a bungalow where most of the head librarians had taken residence since it was built in the early 1900s. Arnie had convinced the town to let him purchase the home, and for as long as Stella could remember, it had been his.

Arnie's most extravagant possession in an otherwise humble life was parked in front of his cottage—an inherited 1955 silver BMW 503 convertible.

All the lights were off inside. Arnie never went to bed before midnight, and most evenings he stayed up well into the wee hours. There was no way he was sleeping already. He must still be inside the library. Stella jingled the keys on her key ring until she found the fat-headed gold key that unlocked the back door.

Her assumption that Arnie was still inside was validated when the beeping of the alarm didn't start as soon as she opened the door. The only light still illuminating the library dangled high above the circulation desk, spotlighting the circular space like an actor in a play, leaving the rest of the stage in darkness.

“Arnie?” His name echoed through the empty library, returned to her, and circled around her shoulders.

She squatted behind the desk and reached for her purse. It seemed to jump into her hands, saying, *I thought you'd left me here!* She shouldered the bag and stood. The burning sensation in her chest intensified, and Stella gripped the edge of the counter. A small pool of liquid, a vivid purple, rose up through the desktop as though a fountain had burst inside the wood. Just as they had last night, words emerged from the glowing goo, forming solid letters. Violet roots stretched out from the words and wrapped around objects on

JENNIFER MOORMAN

the desktop as the fire in her blood intensified. Her hands became clammy, and Stella swayed with nausea.

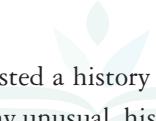
The words **love once** undulated on the desk, and as soon as Stella spoke them aloud, the blistering in her chest lessened. She steadied herself and swallowed, thankful she hadn't barfed on the desk. She lifted a trembling hand to her forehead and inhaled a slow, deep breath.

The journal was at home. Would the pain return if she didn't write down the words immediately? She quickly said, "I'll write you down when I get home, I promise." Seeming to understand, the words unwrapped their purple tendrils and skittered off the countertop, disappearing into the dark library.

Stella drew in another breath and rubbed her fingertips across the left side of her chest. What was happening to her?

Laughter drifted across the foyer. She glanced toward the vault door on the opposite side of the room. The door to the antiquities archives stood ajar, and more laughter—no, *giggling*—tumbled out the open doorway. Stella started walking toward the sound but hesitated. Arnie *never* giggled, and it was a woman's voice.

Chapter 3

Blue Sky Valley boasted a history dating back past the American Revolution, and many unusual, historical, and unique items and books had been tucked into a spacious, separated, and sealed section beneath part of the library. Built into the limestone, the solid walls had withstood several natural disasters over the years, and the archives remained a fortress of knowledge and artifacts.

Stella followed the sound of laughter and voices toward the vault door, which was partially open at the top of the stairs, but it shouldn't have been unless Arnie was down there. She tugged on the door's metal handwheel, opening it wider. She stood, listening, but silence greeted her. Had she imagined the laughter?

"Arnie?" she called in a voice quieted by unease swelling inside her. Smoky-gray words poofed out of the open space: **Apprehension. Fear. Anxiety.**

Were the words a warning? Was there a reason to be uneasy about the archives tonight?

Stella tiptoed down the stairs, breathing in the scents of earth,

old parchment, and tanned leather. At the bottom of the staircase, she saw a lamp burning at the far end of the room. Was Arnie researching? She took two steps into the dimly lit archives and shivered. Laughter swept down the nearest aisle. But it wasn't Arnie's laugh. It belonged to a female. Had Arnie invited a *lady friend* into the archives? She froze, wondering if she should turn around and pretend she never found Arnie in an awkward situation, but curiosity propelled her forward.

Glowing, typewriter-font words slipped out of the shadows and floated across the shelves, then across a World War II uniform hanging in a display case. **Borrowed Time. Temporary. Please stay.** The last phrase tightened Stella's throat. More voices drifted out and quivered around her.

"Arnie?" she whispered.

The pool of lamplight touched the tip of her tennis shoe. She gripped the edge of the nearest bookcase and peered around it. A young boy wearing an outfit made of brittle autumn leaves grinned and leaped onto a study table. He wiggled his bare toes and winked at Stella. A woman, sitting with her back to Stella, laughed; her long blond hair gleamed in the soft light. A dreadfully thin man with a nose like a toucan's beak walked toward the table as his deep voice resonated against the shelves. His white shirt ballooned around his narrow frame as he walked, and the bend-snap, bend-snap of his loping gait reminded Stella of a flamingo. Was he reciting a psalm?

The man's steady gaze stretched past the table and landed on Stella's face. Her back straightened as though she'd been electrocuted. The man stopped speaking, tucked a worn Bible against his chest, and bowed his head toward Stella, causing the blond woman to turn in her chair. The impossibly beautiful woman's skin glowed as though she'd eaten handfuls of stars. Stella had never seen anyone lovelier, and she had trouble looking directly at the woman's face.

Her eyes burned the way they did when she stared at the midday sun.

“*Ya su. Kalispèra*,” the woman said in a voice smoother than poured ink.

Is that . . . Greek? Stella’s brain struggled to translate. She and Arnie hadn’t practiced Greek in months. “Good evening?” she mumbled.

The young boy leaped from the table, leaving a glittering comet trail behind him. Stella jerked backward, tripped over her own feet, and fell, knocking her head hard on a shelf. Her vision blurred, and she crumpled against the bookcase, sliding down until she plopped on the floor like a ragdoll.

A thin face dominated by an overly large nose leaned into her swirling vision. His green, glassy eyes studied her face. “My dear lady, are you quite all right?” He turned his beaked nose away from her and called to someone over his shoulder. “Arnie, I do believe one of your characters has lost her way.”

Arnie? Stella’s vision tunneled, and then everything disappeared.



“STELLA?” ARNIE SAID as he lifted her into a sitting position. The faint glow from the lamp highlighted the creases of concern on his lined face. “Come on, kiddo. Don’t you know better than to scare an old man?”

Stella blinked. He lifted her slowly and propped her upright against a bookshelf. She touched the back of her head and winced.

“Probably gonna have a real goose egg back there. What were you doing down here? You left almost half an hour ago.”

“I forgot my purse. I found it under the front desk, but then I heard voices. Yours, I thought, and I noticed the archives door was

open, so I came down here looking for you, but I saw . . .” A cold sensation on her leg distracted her for a moment. She bent her right leg toward her and patted the back of her capris. The fabric was wet from knee to cuff. “Why are my pants wet?”

“My chamomile tea,” Arnie said. “Let’s try to stand. Slowly, now. Slowly.”

Stella grabbed Arnie’s outstretched hand, and with his help, she eased to her feet, swaying for a few seconds before her equilibrium righted itself. The book spines in her line of vision undulated like underwater kelp until she blinked a few times and refocused. A throbbing ache pounded inside her skull. “Why is your tea on my pants?”

Arnie tugged on his earlobe, looking apologetic. “I spilled it when I tried to pull a book from the shelf, and when I returned to clean it up, you were sprawled on the floor. I’m assuming you slipped on it and fell.”

Stella noticed a mop propped against the study table. She hadn’t remembered slipping on the wet floor. What she remembered was seeing three strangers in the archives. She peered around Arnie’s shoulder.

He glanced behind him before turning back to her. “How’re you feeling?”

“I feel like Wile E. Coyote after an anvil has fallen on his head.”

“Let me drive you home,” Arnie said as he hooked his hand around her elbow. He slid her purse over her shoulder and led her up the aisle and away from the study table.

Stella sighed but leaned into him. “I’m fine, Arnie. I have a headache, but I can drive.” In truth, her head throbbed so intensely that nausea surged. First the purple words and now this.

“Maybe I should take you to the ER to see if you have a concussion. Or keep you awake all night with coffee and lousy jokes.”

Stella stopped walking, forcing Arnie to stop. She inhaled a few slow breaths and peered behind them. “A few aspirin will help, but I thought I saw—There were people down here.”

Arnie frowned, causing his thick eyebrows to form an unruly bridge over his nose. “This morning? Do you mean the Wallaces? Weren’t they researching Libby’s genealogy?”

Stella shook her head, which caused her to feel like she’d been twirling round and round. She closed her eyes and swallowed another swell of nausea. When it was safe to open her mouth, she said, “No. Tonight. When I came looking for you, I saw—a boy dressed like Peter Pan. He was standing on the table, and then he jumped at me.”

Arnie’s laugh startled her. It burst out down the aisle, and the books shivered on their shelves. An antique bell in a display case vibrated, sending a low hum into the room. “You knocked yourself silly.”

She started to argue with him, but what if she’d actually fallen, knocked herself out, and created the entire scenario in her dreaming mind? Still, the brief interaction had seemed real. And what about the words she’d seen when she entered the archives? **Apprehension. Fear. Anxiety.** Were they meant to caution her regarding the people? But she and Arnie were very much alone in the archives now. If she pushed the issue about the people, she’d have to admit the words she’d seen, and that wasn’t a secret she wanted to share with Arnie.

He urged her forward out of the antiquities section and led her up the staircase to the main floor. They passed through the unlit spaces until Arnie stood at the back door and set the alarm.

He stepped onto the back stoop with her, pulled out his keys, and locked the door. “I’d feel better if you’d let me drive you home.”

The humid night air scented of blooming magnolias and cut

JENNIFER MOORMAN

grass. "I'm not gonna risk barfing in your car, but thanks." She dug her car keys out of her pocket and adjusted her purse on her shoulder.

"You call me if you need anything, you hear me?"

"Yes, sir." She waved over her shoulder as she shuffled to her car. Arnie stood and watched her reverse out of the parking space and drive away. As she turned onto the main street and glanced into the rearview mirror, she saw him descend the stairs and cross the grassy lot toward his cottage.

Stella gripped the steering wheel with both hands and cranked the air-conditioning to help ease the queasiness from the pounding in her skull. *Don't barf. Don't barf. Don't barf*, she repeated as a mantra in her mind.

A half hour later when she crawled into her bed in the quiet house, she closed her heavy eyelids. Crickets chirped outside her bedroom window. Her mind created an image of a man's bulbous green eyes staring at her, calling her one of Arnie's characters. That image was followed by a young boy leaping off a table, leaving a sparkling golden trail behind him. A woman whispered words in Greek, and Stella marveled at her own imagination before she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 4

*M*onday morning Stella awoke feeling hungover, reminiscent of someone who'd reveled all night at the Mad Hatter's tea party where the tea had been spiked and the party was full of madness. She hadn't had a legit hangover since the night before she left Memphis to come home because of her father's heart attack, and that was almost four years ago now.

The scalding shower water soothed the pounding in her skull until she faced away from the spray and the water assaulted her bruised head like a hailstorm. She wrapped a towel around herself and wiped her feet on the flatter-than-a-johnnycake bathmat. Glancing up, she noticed the outdated jewel-toned wallpaper peeled away from one corner.

Like most things in her life, it was past time for an update. Everything—house included—needed a refresh. Her childhood home was trapped in a thirty-year-old design style chosen by her flippant mother and her acquiescent father. She had the inheritance money to make changes, but she hadn't removed a single item from

the house for no other reason than she, too, was chained to the past.

Stella cried out when her comb grazed over the golf ball-size lump on the back of her head. She smoothed styling gel through her curls and decided to let her hair air dry. Back in her room, she pulled on a pair of linen shorts and a yellow cotton blouse. Out of nothing but habit, she clasped a daisy pendant necklace around her neck. It had been a gift from her mother on her sixth birthday—a goodbye gift even though no one in the family knew she was leaving yet. Stella recalled how long the necklace chain had been at the time, more suited for an adult than a child. Her mother said she'd grow into it. Had she also expected Stella to grow into the acceptance that her mother left?

Stella didn't know why she still wore the necklace like a talisman that might somehow call her mother back to her. So far, it was nothing but an infrequent reminder that her mother had better things to do than raise a family.

In the kitchen, she chased two aspirin with a large glass of water. While the single-cup coffee maker started to brew, she sagged onto the sofa. Barely a minute later, the coffee maker released a hiss of steam and plopped the last few dark drops into her cup. She grabbed it and dumped in two sugar packets and a splash of milk before returning to the sofa.

Summer heat pressed against the glass, causing the air conditioner to create condensation like pearls of sparkling dew across the lower half of the panes. A mental image of the strangers in the archives triggered a memory about the vivid purple words rising up through the circulation desk. Her chest spasmed, and Stella jolted upright on the couch, nearly spilling her coffee.

"The words," she blurred. She'd come home half out of it because of the headache and had completely forgotten.

Stella found her journal and purple pen where she'd left them on

the kitchen counter. She took a quick sip of her coffee and flipped to the page with the words *I fell in*. She hesitated, remembering the words she needed to add, and then frowned. She uncapped the pen and wrote *love once*.

“I fell in love once,” she spoke to no one, and the lines on her forehead deepened. “And it was a mess.” She slammed the journal shut. “Thanks for the brutal reminder. As if I needed it.”

She stood in the kitchen drinking her coffee, not wanting to relax on the couch because she wouldn’t relax. Not with her mind annoyingly zigzagging between the weird night with Arnie in the archives and the painful purple words that appeared without warning and without clarity. What did they want? What message was she obviously missing?

Toss in the burned journal full of words of love, despair, and loneliness, combined with the realization that she was still hung up on her ex *on purpose*, and could a day start any worse?

Her cell phone dinged with a text from an unknown number. Hi! I heard you were in the market to sell your house. I know we can fetch a great price. Call or text me at this number, and let’s make a deal! Carla

Stella gritted her teeth. Percy. He had to be behind these Realtors sharking around her, intent on selling their home. Why didn’t he care about where they grew up? Why was he so willing to get rid of their memories? *How* was it so easy for him to move on?

She glanced around the outdated kitchen. If she closed her eyes, she could picture her dad sitting at the table, drinking coffee and reading yesterday’s paper, giving her the highlights she wasn’t the least bit interested in at the time. Now she’d sell her first edition of *Gone with the Wind* just to hear his voice again. Loneliness expanded around her, nearly swallowing her. She pressed her hands against her chest, her lungs protesting when she inhaled.

She dumped out her coffee and put the mug in the dishwasher. Then she dropped a few handfuls of Fruit Loops into a plastic, zip-top bag. She grabbed her purse and noticed her worn copy of *Beyond the Southern Horizon* on the counter. Just seeing it swelled her heart again with longing for her dad. It was one of his favorite historical fiction WWII books, and he must have read it a hundred times.

She picked up the book and pressed it against her chest, hugging it because she couldn't hug her dad. He used to tell Percy and Stella the heroic tale of Jack Mathis as though the American soldier had been a family member. Because of the way her dad described Jack and his achievements, Stella had grown up having a crush on a fictional man. The grainy black-and-white photos of Jack included in the pages to add a more realistic flair to the novel had only cemented her adoration because Jack was undeniably handsome, and he had set the bar for the kind of man Stella was searching for. An impossible hunt so far.

Jack Mathis's fictional story had been inspired by a real-life, local war hero born in 1919 in Blue Sky Valley who died in the Second World War during the Battle of the Bulge. The real soldier was said to have been named Johnny Moore, and he had sacrificed himself to save four soldiers in his unit when they were attacked by a German spy hiding in their ranks.

The author of *Beyond the Southern Horizon* had taken quite a bit of creative license with his version of the events. Jack Mathis had catalogued his squad's journey, written about their highs and lows, detailed their loves and fears, and penned his own poetry in a couple journals while he was stationed overseas. The story went that after Jack's untimely death, one of his men retrieved his journals and took them back to the States upon his return. Afterward, a historian happened upon the journals and crafted a detailed novel about a hero he never wanted forgotten.

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Stella understood that the few photographs inside the book weren't authentic and were most likely of a model dressed in period garb. But to Stella, the soldier in the photos was the ideal man, a swoon-worthy hero. Jack watched the world with his steady gaze and pale eyes, and Stella had often daydreamed about his eyes looking toward her.

She flipped open the book to a photograph and rubbed her thumb over the image. When had she stopped believing that finding a man like Jack was realistic? Years ago, probably. Long before Wade. Even though it presently annoyed her, she couldn't deny there was still a tiny whisper of hope that real love could be found. The stack of happily-ever-after novels on her TBR proved she hadn't quite given up. Could she one day find a man like Jack? Someone who would make promises and keep them?

Stella could blame her dad for introducing her to a fictional man with no equal in the real world, but loving *Beyond the Southern Horizon* and Jack connected her with her dad, and that bond was life-giving. She slipped the book into her purse and grabbed the half-filled journal and pen before she drove across town to the library.

Blue Sky Valley bustled with early morning activity. Kids dressed in brightly colored bathing suits leaped in and out of a lawn sprinkler that waved through the air like a rainbow of water. She envied their freedom, their laughter. When was the last time she laughed so easily, when she didn't feel weighed down by her own heaviness? Frost Bites, the downtown ice cream shop, turned on its neon-pink Open sign, and Beau Anderson stepped out on the sidewalk to roll out the blue- and white-striped awning. The temperature already soared past ninety degrees, and the shop would be full of patrons by midmorning.

Once she arrived at the library, Stella tossed her purse into a bot-

tom drawer tucked beneath the circulation desk. She willed herself out of the lingering funk. This pattern of dragging herself through life, living the same day on repeat with Eeyore-worthy gloom always threatening was tiresome.

A wholly more interesting way to spend the day was to start figuring out what was going on. She wondered if there would be an opening to talk to Arnie about last night in the archives. Even though he insisted she'd knocked herself silly, the "vision" seemed too real, too authentic to be a hallucination or dream. As Stella walked the main floor, popping Fruit Loops into her mouth, she found Arnie in the folk and fairy tales section near the front of the library.

His blue button-down shirt was neatly pressed and tucked into gray slacks. Arnie's gray-white hair was neatly combed and parted, and his black glasses matched his polished shoes that shined in the morning light. Arnie dressed like a man better suited for a lawyer's office or a corporate job. He had told Stella on numerous occasions that one secret to not looking like a frail old man was not to dress like one. No one would call Arnie frail or old. For a sixty-eight-year-old head librarian, Arnie looked anything but worn out and feeble, and he was the best-dressed man she knew. He was also the most intelligent.

He shelled an oversize copy of Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* bound in navy-blue leather. "Morning, sunshine. How's the concussion?" He cocked his head at her as if daring her to lie about how she really felt.

Stella shrugged and avoided his steady gaze. "I've had worse days, but it hurts like the dickens." She motioned toward the back of her head.

"No permanent damage, I hope?"

She pushed her damp hair behind her shoulders and rubbed the

THE CHARMED LIBRARY

back of her neck. “We’ll have to wait and see.”

“How’s the heart?” he asked, his voice gentle and wrapped in kindness.

So much for avoiding conversations that reinvigorated the sadness. Arnie’s concern was sincere and valid. Her heart had taken more of a beating than the cracking she’d given her skull. “Still there, but wishing it was shriveled and charred and lifeless.”

Arnie shelved another book. “To give the Grinch a run for his money?”

Stella straightened a book on a nearby shelf, lining up its spine evenly with the ones on each side. “I’d totally beat him.”

Arnie chuckled. “Because if you’re anything, it’s heartless and cruel, especially to children.”

Arnie had a way of pulling out her smile even when she didn’t feel like ever smiling again. “Anyone been in yet?” she asked.

He shook his head, and they walked toward the circulation desk. A slow, quiet library day could often be excruciatingly boring, but a peaceful start to the morning was one of Stella’s favorite things. It felt like inhaling a deep breath or standing barefoot in a grassy meadow. Libraries in the mornings felt like endless possibilities, endless stories that could take a person anywhere. Stella grabbed the baggie of Fruit Loops. “Did you finish all the morning tasks? Clear the book drop? Run the hold slips? Reboot the computers?”

“Are you testing me to see if I can still perform my duties efficiently?” He pointed toward a rickety cart that Stella thought had been built at the same time as the library—a millennium ago. The right back wheel lagged as though caught on bubble gum, and the front left wheel squeaked to high heaven. “As my minion, I’m going to command you to shelve the rest of those. You might want to oil that front wheel again. WD-40 is in the desk drawer.”

Stella caught sight of a flyer taped to the end of a bookshelf. Blue

JENNIFER MOORMAN

Sky Valley's annual festival was that weekend. "What about festival duties? Do you need me to call anyone or follow-up on anything?"

Arnie shook his head. "All moving along like clockwork. The town's committee is even more organized than last year. They'll start setting up Friday, and I have our list of duties already, but no reason to worry about that right now. Do you have everything ready for the care packages and donations?"

Stella nodded. "We have an overflow already, and I suspect we'll get even more donations during the festival."

"Your dad would be proud," Arnie said. "You've grown what he started. Every year it's gotten bigger." He glanced over his shoulder. "That reminds me. I have another box of book donations for you."

She smiled, thinking about the program her dad started years ago. Being a Navy veteran, he'd wanted to honor others in the military, so he'd started creating care packages for those actively serving. He used the festival every year as a big push to gather supplies and donations for the boxes. She'd taken over after his passing, and it had been her idea to add books to the care packages.

"Thank you for the extras."

Arnie slid back the cuff of his blue shirtsleeve and checked his watch. Even from a distance the silver face was so large Stella could tell the time. "Margot should be here in half an hour. She'll want to set up in the story time room before the kids start crowding in. I told her she could bring cookies again, but she'd have to keep an eye on little Brendan Brannigan. He likes to shove extras into his pockets."

Stella's lips twitched in one corner. "And his mama sure didn't like sending those extra cookies through the wash."

Arnie exhaled and rubbed his ear. "I got an earful."

"Two earfuls."

Arnie's dark eyes searched her face, and his expression reminded

THE CHARMED LIBRARY

Stella of when she was young and her dad would lift her up in his arms as though she was a prize at the fair, smiling up at her with such pride and love.

“You sure you’re okay?” Arnie asked. “Work half a day, and if you’re not up for the afternoon, take off.” He tossed his thumb over his shoulder as he walked off. “I mean it, kiddo.”

She popped the last of the Fruit Loops into her mouth. “Arnie, I’m *fine*.”

“That’s what women say when they’re anything but,” he said as he headed toward the main staircase leading to the second floor.

She walked over to the library cart. Its three shelves were loaded with children’s books—picture books, board books, read-a-longs, easy readers, and chapter books—all needing to be returned to their homes on the main floor.

“Arnie, I wanted to ask you about—” Three glossy brochures sat on top of the children’s books. She picked them up and waved them in the air. “What are these?” she shouted loud enough for Arnie to hear.

She pinched the papers between her forefinger and thumb and held them away from her body the way someone might hold soiled towels. Serif words, blocky and bold, slipped out from between the pressed pages. **Revive. New faces. Matriculation.**

Arnie turned and looked at her. His smile lifted his cheeks. “Three great colleges with outstanding English programs. Two close by and one a thousand miles away in case you need a change of scenery.”

Exasperation throbbed in her head. “College? I have a master’s degree in accounting.”

Arnie stopped smiling. He closed the space between them, his shoes clicking against the polished tiles. Stella’s back straightened as she prepared for a lecture.

JENNIFER MOORMAN

“You could still go back to school. Get a degree in something you actually enjoy,” he said.

“I don’t need a degree to be your assistant. Besides, I’m too old to go back to school.”

Arnie laughed. “You’re never too old to start something new. It would take you less than two years for another degree, even less time if you only want certifications. If you don’t want to go back to the university, that’s okay, but you need to consider a higher paying job. You’re too smart to be someone’s assistant forever. Your father would want more for you, and so does Percy. I assume he’s said as much.”

Stella slapped the college brochures on the countertop. Arnie wasn’t the big baddie lording over her, but his questioning made her doubt her life choices *again*, and that peeved her. Why? Because she didn’t want to look deep enough to discover the heart of the issue. She knew Percy wanted more for her, and her dad would, too, if he were still alive. As if either of them truly knew what “more” was. How could they when Stella didn’t even know?

“If you need me, I’ll be putting away books.” She pointed to the brochures. “You can add those to the ashes in the furnace.” She skipped the grease needed to ease the cart’s front wheel and squeaked and shoved her way toward the children’s section.

She heard Percy’s voice in her head, *Just the two of us against the world*. Stella and Percy had no family left except an aunt living in Rhode Island. She didn’t count their mother, who had been nonexistent in their lives for more than twenty years. Stella didn’t even know if the woman was still alive. Percy had always looked out for her and was grateful he didn’t have to shoulder the burden of sorting through their dad’s final arrangements alone, but he certainly hadn’t wanted Stella to quit her accounting job in Memphis and move back to Blue Sky Valley.

Aside from telling her she needed to *Get a better job* or return to accounting, Percy had also been nagging her to sell the family home they'd both inherited, but Stella refused. When Percy pressed her for a reason, she'd said, *It's our home.*

He'd corrected her: *It was our home, and just because a thing once was something doesn't mean it always has to be. We can change our minds, start over, try something new.*

Starting over and trying something new was easy for Percy. He had a temperament built for adventure and taking life just as it was. *Percy knows how to hold up his hands on a roller coaster and enjoy it*, their dad used to say. *And what about me?* Stella had asked. *You're a lot more like me*, he'd said, and she had shined at the compliment until he added, *You like to hold on too long, too tightly. I wish I'd held up my hands and enjoyed the ride more.* Her dad had never confirmed if holding on was good or bad, but at the time she'd suspected that holding on wasn't the best option. These days *holding on* for Stella was the same as *being stuck.*

Now Percy lived on the west coast of Florida, enjoying the beach life he'd dreamed about. He worked as a financial advisor in a successful firm, and every time he talked to Stella, he pestered her about going back to *a real job.*

Stella sometimes thought about looking for a job in finance again, but imagining sitting through years of crunching numbers and balancing someone else's spreadsheet made her eyes glaze over. As a kid, she had believed a more magical life was possible—one where words came to her, books were portals to other worlds, and her mother cherished her. But after her mom left, life didn't feel magical anymore, and the only thing that was left of the *magic* were the words and books. Suddenly her ability with words had seemed too weird, and she wanted to be normalish. *Normal* equated to boring, safe, and practical. Growing up and pursuing a career in finance

made sense, but she never loved it and certainly wasn't happy doing it.

Returning to Big Sky Valley and working in the library was a bit of an escape, and she loved how books made people happy, how they made people think about and question reality. Mostly she cherished how she could disappear into a book and not have to engage in the world unless she wanted to. After four years, she had settled into a life here, and the idea that she should *or even could* change her life path sounded unsafe. And exhausting.

She shelved books up and down the aisles in an annoyed huff until she heard Margot Marshall call out to her from the foyer.

Stella stepped out from the stacks, and Margot lifted one hand in a wave. She carried a plastic container of cookies in her other hand. Her dark braids draped over her shoulders.

"Morning, Mrs. Marshall. Excited for story time? Can I help you get ready?" Stella asked, thankful for the distraction from her frustration.

Margot thanked her as she handed over the container and a stack of napkins. Stella breathed in the scent of warm chocolate chip cookies as she followed Margot into the story time room. Once inside she placed the cookies and napkins on the far table.

Margot dug through her worn canvas bag of books and removed a hardback copy of Washington Irving's short stories. "I checked this out last week, and I need to return it. Television and movies have skewed my students' knowledge of the *real* Ichabod Crane, and I needed to set them straight. I was satisfied in knowing they enjoyed Irving's original story just as much as all of the copycats. It's so mysterious and open-ended." She passed the book to Stella.

The book warmed in Stella's hands, radiating heat like a lava rock. Cursive, slanted words rippled out of the book like circular waves leaving an epicenter. **Green eyes. Pontificating. Bible.**

THE CHARMED LIBRARY

Stella looked up at Margot, a shiver quivering up her spine. “Did—did Ichabod Crane have green eyes?”

Margot tapped a scarlet fingernail against her matching cherry lips and then nodded. “Most people remember the description of his skinny body and smallish head, the opposite of a bobblehead, I would imagine. But, yes, I think he did. Glassy green. Why do you ask?”

A gentle buzzing filled Stella’s head like the distant hum of white noise. She lowered the book, causing the words to dissipate. “Just an image I remember. We arranged the bean bags and chairs in here last night, although most of the kids want to sit on the floor—”

“Or lay on the floor,” Margot said with a chuckle.

“Don’t you wish adults would allow themselves to get as cozy and attend a story time? I’d be up for lying around all day listening to someone read books.”

Margot’s laugh filled the room. “Sign me up for that!”

Stella smiled. “I’ll add it to the suggestion box. Anything else you need?”

Margot turned in a full circle, her knee-length polka-dot skirt twirling out like an opening umbrella as she studied the room. “Not at the moment. Thanks, Stella. I’ll holler if I need you.”

Stella carried Washington Irving’s short stories to the circulation desk. She tapped her finger against the front cover of the book. The world was full of coincidences, but her fingers tingled, so she grabbed her notebook and jotted down her thoughts, a haiku this time.

*My Ichabod Crane, Lover of one who did not,
You were never found.*

Then she closed her notebook and returned to the book cart. As

she shelved the last children's book, the story time children began pushing through the front doors with their parents in tow. Half the parents stayed with their kids, and the other half dropped them off as though the library were a temporary day care. Tiny voices and whispered giggles filled the downstairs until the kids were safely snuggled in the room with Margot. The sounds of the library soothed Stella, and she found herself relaxing somewhat.

At the circulation desk, she opened one of the side drawers and pulled out her mug, which said *Librarian Because Book Wizard Isn't an Official Job Title*. Arnie had given it to her last Christmas. She wasn't officially a librarian because she lacked the proper schooling and license, but he didn't care, and she liked thinking of herself as a book wizard.

She wanted coffee, but Arnie would probably encourage her to have at least two cups of green tea before she imbibed high levels of caffeine again. Green tea tasted like drinking earth, which was probably the point, but Stella preferred her dessert-style coffees.

One of the mothers slipped out of the children's room and walked toward her. The mother waved a book before placing it on the counter. "Arnie suggested this book last week for Tyler. He said all young boys love it, and he was right. Downside is that Tyler has been jumping off everything. It started with his bed, and this morning he asked if I thought there was an easy way to get on the roof. Lord, have mercy—the *roof*." She rolled her hazel eyes as she shook her head. Tiny words marched up the woman's forearm: **Resilient. Thankful. Youthful.**

"Boys. God love them, but they just grow up to be men while still holding on to their little boy spirits, right? What do we do with them?"

"Not fall in love with complicated ones, that's for sure," Stella mumbled.

“What’s that?” the woman asked, leaning closer.

“Nothing,” Stella said with a hesitant smile. Crimson words resembling caterpillars crawled out of her notebook as though creeping, not wanting to be seen: **Inferior. Misleading. Abscond.**

A testament to her last relationship? Stella refocused on the mother and glanced at the returned book. *Peter Pan* was printed in gold letters across the glossy paperback. She thought of the young boy she’d imagined leaping toward her in the antiquities archives. She fluttered the pages with her fingers and out slipped a few winged words. **Come away with me. Never grow up. Always believe.** Stella slapped her hand on the book, and the words rushed off the desk. She looked up at the mother.

“Is Arnie around? I wanted to thank him,” she said.

Stella nodded and pointed toward the stairs. “He’s up there somewhere. I’ll get this returned for you.”

The mother smiled and nodded. “I’ll see if I can catch him after story time.”

Stella stared down at J. M. Barrie’s novel. So many words today. They hadn’t been this active in years. Something odd was definitely happening.

She stacked *Peter Pan* on top of Washington Irving’s stories while her fingertips burned. She heard Arnie’s designer shoes approaching her from behind, and she whirled around.

Arnie lumbered across the way with an armful of books and a stack of folders. He raised his eyebrows at her in question.

“Someone returned a book with *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* in it, and then *Peter Pan* was just turned in,” Stella said.

Arnie dropped the books on the desk. “And I had scrambled eggs for breakfast with two biscuits.”

Stella frowned. “I’m serious, Arnie.”

“So am I. I shouldn’t have had two, but I couldn’t stop myself

JENNIFER MOORMAN

this morning.” He patted his rotund belly and shrugged. “But I’m an old man. Shouldn’t I enjoy the simple things in life, like buttermilk biscuits?”

“Arnie,” Stella said and sighed. “Those are characters from the vision—the *dream* I had.”

Arnie placed the stack of folders next to the books as the front door opened again. “Stella, you work all day, nearly every day, in books. You’ll dream about them now and again.”

“No, I’m talking about last night when I was downstairs in the archives, and I . . . Well, I guess I fell, but I thought I saw Peter Pan and a super-skinny man. He was reciting psalms, and he had green eyes. And there was a blond woman. Beautiful, like a fairytale queen or something.”

Arnie stepped toward the front of the desk. “Sounds like a woman *I’d* like to dream about. Do you think she can cook?” He sidestepped Stella. “Good morning, Mrs. Little. How can I help you?”

“Good morning, Arnie,” Mrs. Little said. “I almost hate to return this one.”

Stella turned to face the tall, middle-aged patron just as she heaved a heavy book onto the high counter. Stella tilted her head and read the spine. *Greek Mythology*.

Mrs. Little propped her arms on the desk and leaned toward Arnie. Her glossy maroon lipstick shined in the fluorescent lighting. A smile stretched across her rosy face and dimpled her cherub cheeks. “Can you imagine being so beautiful that people would go to war over you? Just to have your love?”

Arnie chuckled. “Not in the least. Did you enjoy your reading?”

“Very much. I need another suggestion. Something mysterious, I think.”

Arnie walked out of the desk area and led Mrs. Little toward the staircase where adult fiction lived on the second floor. As they

THE CHARMED LIBRARY

walked up the steps, Stella heard her ask, “Do you really think Helen of Troy was that beautiful?”

“Stunning,” Arnie said. “Breathtakingly stunning.”

Stella stared at the returned mythology book, and very slowly, she reached out and touched it. The hardcover heated beneath her fingertips. A woman’s laugh, followed by the echo of Greek words, drifted through the library. Stella thought of a woman whose voice was as smooth as honey, whose face she could not look upon directly. *Helen of Troy.*

Stella glanced toward the vault door leading to the antiquities archives. “What in the world is going on?”

