

Chapter Six

Three Years Later

Situated in the south-east corner of Vermont right on the New Hampshire border was the thriving community of Brattleboro. Combining a small-town feel with a booming downtown business area with roots in both farming and industry it boasted a thriving arts and culture center.

It was Saturday which meant the Farmer's Market was in full swing. Vendors were arranged in an oval allowing visitors to peruse at their leisure, laughing and chatting in the festive atmosphere lled with music. The various vendors offered everything from massages and scented candles to cheese and raw milk, from wine and spirits to honey and syrup, from knitted textiles and jewelry to homegrown vegetables and wild herbs. Literally anything and everything one could imagine was available depending on the season.

Walking along the line of vendors enjoying a fresh-made crepe Sarah paused to admire a booth selling pottery before moving on. She wore thermal-lined, burgundy leggings and a cream sweater to combat the early spring chill still lingering in the air, as well as a gray cardigan and wine-colored infinity scarf purchased a year ago from the vendor selling hand-knit alpaca textiles.

"Sarah! There you are!" a vendor called beckoning her over and offering her a slice of cheesecake while they chatted.

It was hard to say no so Sarah settled in to talk while enjoying the New York-style treat topped with blueberries. The vendor happily offered a glass of their signature lemonade to wash it down.

"How have you been?" the vendor smiled.

"You ask me that every week," Sarah laughed. "How much can really change in a week?"

"Well, seven days is a long time."

Sarah smiled as the conversation quickly turned to the weather and what the farmer's almanac predicted for the growing season. Since moving to the community she had been warmly welcomed by everyone. They were eager to answer her questions but they also respected her privacy avoiding topics they learned made her uncomfortable, particularly about her past before moving to Brattleboro.

Here they knew her simply as Sarah Thomas and for the past two years this had been her home. At first she had been nervous about moving somewhere so close to New York, the one place she wanted to avoid. It took some time before she found a suitable property but she loved the rural feel and slower pace that made for excellent writing.

After the divorce was finalized she had Taylor make arrangements to once again receive her royalty checks which she had temporarily stopped during her marriage. Even after paying hefty taxes on the rather large one-lump sum she had a tidy nest egg that ensured a comfortable life without any need to worry about money. Rosemary's popularity hadn't waned since her marriage and she continued to crank out a book every year so her income for the future was also ensured.

It was rather ironic that her father had been forced to sell his company and his daughter off because he was broke when she could have bought out the company five times over but she had no interest in entangling herself in her father's mess. Especially not after...

It had been years since she last spoke to her father or her brother. They never reached out to her and she certainly never reached out to them. As far as she was concerned they were strangers and belonged in the same box she locked up her feelings for her ex-husband.

As far as her new neighbors were concerned, she kept her past intentionally vague. They knew she had come to Brattleboro to escape the Big City in favor of a slower change of pace. Her parents were deceased and she had no siblings. Though this back story earned her some pitying glances it satisfied inquiries and the locals never asked for more details not wanting to invade her privacy.

"Mommy! Mommy!" an excited voice shrieked.

Sarah set down her dessert plate and scooped up the three-year-old running toward her. Wearing bedazzled jeans and a knitted sweater under a light jacket the toddler was her perfect miniature with dark blonde hair and hazel eyes. She giggled as Sarah blew raspberries against her rosy cheeks. A year-old corgi circled Sarah's legs wiggling its tailless rump as it excitedly barked.

"Hello precious!" the lemonade vendor cooed. "Here Zoe, have a cookie."

"Thank you!"

"She is getting so big!"

"Tell me about it," Sarah dramatically sighed shifting her daughter to the other hip.

Her pregnancy had been unexpected and she struggled with whether or not to keep it. When she walked out Sarah had every intention of forgetting the last three years. Flying out to New Orleans for Mardi Gras had been a whim but one she was glad she followed. In the end she stayed a year re-merging herself in the culture, food and mystical bayou while also reconnecting to old friends.

New Orleans happened to be the hometown of her college roommate, Aubrey, who gladly opened her doors to Sarah no questions asked despite being a new mom herself. In addition her roommate's aunt, a noted traiteur and card reader, was one of the main inspirations for Rosemary. She insisted everyone call her Ya-Ya and like her niece welcomed Sarah with open arms. In addition to her herbal and energy healing work Ya-Ya also ran a bar off Canal Street. It was Ya-Ya who convinced her a baby could be a new beginning rather than a reminder of a painful past.

After some rather painful soul-searching as well as a tarot card reading Sarah eventually decided to keep the baby. The pregnancy had been smooth enough but the birth had been difficult. Perhaps due to her own recovering body the baby had been both underweight and premature. Sarah endured rapid labor with sometimes excruciating contractions. Zoe had been born quickly but Sarah suffered excessive bleeding.

It was a miracle both survived. Yet when Sarah first held her daughter and looked into eyes that mirrored her own she really understood what it meant to start with a clean slate. From then on it would just be the two of them.

She stayed in New Orleans while she recovered and bonded with her daughter leaning on Aubrey and Ya-Ya for support. Unlike Rosemary she was a New England girl so she started looking for a place for her and her daughter to make their life. She finally settled on Brattleboro after hearing about its Farmer's Market and art culture. It was large enough to have the amenities she was used to while still being a small town perfect for raising a precocious child.

"Oh, by the way, I nished that book you told me about," the vendor chatted unaware of Sarah's wandering train of thought. "I'm on the second book now. And there's a third book right?"

"Oh the third is To Catch a Cattail," Sarah readily replied. "There are nine books so far and I believe the tenth is supposed to come out this year."

"Ten? I have some catching up to do then," she sighed. "The books are fabulous. I wonder if we could get the author to make a personal appearance at our Literary Cocktail Nights. And I adore her name: Rosemary. It's so wholesome and mystical."

Zoe snorted back a laugh munching away on her cookie.

"Well, we should get going," Sarah decided to wrap up the conversation.

"Of course, I have work to do. Take care and see you Saturday!"

Sarah smiled unwrapping the leash from her legs before heading off with the pup in tow. The young corgi gamely kept up with her steps trotting along on its short legs. Zoe was silent as she nished her treat and looked at her mother curiously.

"Mommy."

"Yeah?"

"Why don't you want anyone to know you are Rosemary?"

"Well, it's all about the illusion and mystery. Who is this strange woman? What adventures will she be having next?"

"But you are lying and you always say lying is bad."

"Lying is bad but...this is more like pretend or...You know it's like a magician's act. You remember the magician at Jamie's birthday party don't you? Remember what he said at the start of his act?"

"A magician never reveals his secrets."

"Right."

"Oh, so it's like a magic trick."

"Something like that, yes. But it's only magical if it stays a secret."

Zoe's face scrunched up as she considered this. Then she nodded in acceptance. If it was a magic trick then her mommy was not doing anything wrong and as long as it brought people joy then it was a good secret.

Before leaving the Farmer's Market Sarah collected her purchases and carried them to their vehicle. Zoe skipped along beside her now in control of the dog's leash chatting about the games she played with the other kids. One would never expect she spent almost a month in the NICU hovering on the verge of life and death.

Reaching their little Jeep Grand Cherokee Sarah hit her key fob to open the cargo area. Inside were other purchases made during her extended tour of the market. She added her current armload of vegetables and milk stowing them in the large cooler she kept there for just such items ensuring their freshness for the drive home.

Zoe waited patiently rubbing the corgi's belly until her mother was ready for her. Opening the back door Sarah scooped up the dog and set it inside before lifting up Zoe and plopping her into her car seat. Zoe giggled as she was buckled in.

"Come on Daisy," Zoe patted her knee encouraging the short-legged pup to hop up onto the seat beside her.

The pup snuggled close. Its wiggling interfered with Sarah as she worked the buckles but eventually her daughter was secure. With a sigh Sarah climbed into the driver's seat and buckled up looking at Zoe and Daisy in the backseat. It was a sight worthy of a postcard.

"Are we going home now?" Zoe asked.

"I want to swing by the shop first. Do you mind do you? I promise it will only take a few minutes."

"Okay," Zoe chirped. She never minded going to her mother's store. There was always something new to discover.

With Zoe's okay Sarah drove back into town. With the Farmer's Market still in full swing downtown was fairly quiet and Sarah had no trouble finding a parking spot outside her shop: Cindy's Antique Chic. She started the business last year as a way to exercise her passion and love of antiquing naming the store in her mother's honor.

Hoisting Zoe from the SUV with the pups in tow they escaped the chill air to step into the cozy little shop packed with odds and ends. Old wagon wheels rested against the wall where pictures of various sizes were on display. Wooden crates formed free-standing displays showcasing everything from seized pistons and rusted out gears to books and tin toys. There were chairs made from old barn wood, cases of colored glass bottles and even old signs. Some, like the chairs, were repurposed into useable household items, including a lamp made of stacked gears but others were left as they had been found as unique art pieces.

Sarah toured every garage sale, flea market and estate sale she could find to locate and expand her store's offerings. Though the store began as a small passion project to stay busy between books and also to avoid gossip about where her income came from, it was netting its own little profit. She even had to hire staff to run it.

"Hello Kyle!" Zoe greeted her neighbor to the kid's corner where there were storybooks and toys.

"Hello, Little Princess," the rather lanky store clerk called from the ladder he was using to hang up a chandelier made from metal wagon wheels and Edison bulbs.

Sarah immediately set down her bag to hold the ladder steady as he leaned precariously.

"Thank you," Kyle said slowly coming down after his work was complete.

"How has it been today?"

"Oh, a little slow with the Farmer's Market going on but I did manage to sell those Adirondack chairs."

"Oh good. They were taking up way too much floor space."

"Dale stopped by again."

Sarah cringed. Her life in Brattleboro was just about perfect save for one thing: Dale LeRud. He wasn't a bad person but he was persistent. No matter how many times she turned him down he continued to ask her out.

"I told him I'm not interested," Sarah sighed.

"I know, but he keeps hoping you'll change your mind," Kyle shrugged.

Dale owned one of the gas stations in town and while he was generally personable he had a great deal of him on strong. For Sarah it was too strong and an immediate turnoff. She avoided him whenever she could. She tried to make it clear she only had room in her life and heart for Zoe and her shop. Any activities outside of those two were off limits.

Kyle quietly regarded his employer as she put the ladder away. From the start Sarah was an enigma. She was gorgeous in an almost Hollywood starlet kind of way but polite and gentle. Her eclectic sense of style was both trendy and individual always mixing and matching layers and colors. He was fairly certain she didn't come from a small town no matter how many times she complimented the aesthetic. In fact, she was quite worldly comfortable talking about a number of topics with a certain degree of authority that spoke from experience and extensive travel.

Even the shop itself felt like something she had seen before and was eager to emulate. While other people sometimes became standoffish around him once they figured out he was gay Sarah never once made him feel like he was strange or needed to adhere to society's expectations. She was probably the first person who made him feel normal and that was why he wanted the best for her.

If there was one thing he understood it was heartache and it was clear Sarah suffered a great deal of it. Kyle couldn't help but believe she had come to Brattleboro to escape and forget it. Little Zoe was a balm for wounds Sarah tried not to acknowledge. He had nothing against Dale but he wished the other man would back off and give Sarah the space she needed.

"I wish I could get a guy to chase after me with half his persistence," Kyle sighed trying to lighten the mood.

"Well, you can have Dale."

"Somehow...I don't think he's my type."

Sarah chuckled. "Are you sure you don't need anything from the Farmer's Market? I don't mind staying so you can shop."

"Nah, I'm good this week. Maybe next week."

"All right. Come on Zoe, time to go home and unpack."

"Okay mommy!" Zoe carefully put away the tin toys she had taken from the shelves before hurrying back to her mother. "Bye, bye Kyle!"

"Later Princess Pea," Kyle waved as they stepped outside and left.

Moments after they had driven off a rather burly man in coveralls entered. His gaze quickly swept the interior before landing on Kyle.

"Are they still here?"

"No, they just left."

"I told you to keep her here for me so I can talk to her."

Kyle sighed, "And I told you she's not interested."

"She's been here two years and I've never seen her out with anyone so why wouldn't she be interested?"

"Did you ever stop to think she just might not want to be in a relationship?"

"What about Zoe? She needs a dad, right?"

"That's not your decision to make."

"I don't see why she won't go on one date with me."

"Look, Sarah doesn't talk about her past but I know a broken heart when I see one. Someone hurt her...bad. Real bad."

"What do you mean?"

"If you can't figure it out on your own I'm not saying. But a person who runs from their past always had a valid reason. So leave her alone."

"I don't see the problem," Dale grumbled as he departed.

Kyle shook his head. He had nothing against the other man but he didn't think Dale was a good match for Sarah either. He just hoped the other man would back off. If Dale pushed too hard Sarah would simply leave and find a different town to live in. A woman who was used to running didn't shy from disappearing into the night and Kyle rather liked his job.