

Chapter Seven

Leaving town Sarah drove another mile into the woods before turning down her driveway. It was long and narrow cutting through the rather thick deciduous growth. The trees suddenly parted opening up to a picturesque little farmstead.

A two-story white and gray farmhouse overlooked a red barn and ve-acre pasture. The occupants of the pasture were already at the fence to see who was arriving. The rst was a bay Quarter Horse gelding now almost twenty years old. His pasture mates included a gray donkey and two goats as well as a small ock of chickens that had the run of the yard all of which were purchased at the behest of Zoe who loved animals and couldn't stand the thought of them suffering or without a home.

Like her mother before her, Sarah took Zoe to estate sales and auctions as well as farmer's markets and garage sales. The precocious little girl loved every minute of their outings. Some of the sales took place on farms and Zoe naturally gravitated to anything with fur and feathers. So it really wasn't a surprise that some of those animals came home with them. The only surprise was that Sarah managed to keep it to a minimum. She only hoped Applejack forgave her.

The bay gelding had been with her for almost a decade ever since she spent six months in Kansas on a ranch and tried out barrel racing. She enjoyed it so much she purchased her horse from the ranch and kept him with her. While she lived in New York she boarded him at a stable. Every week she took a cab to Central Park and rode Jack on the trails. As her marriage became more and more intolerable the weekly rides were the only thing that kept her spirits up.

At rst she was afraid she might be recognized but no one seemed aware of who she was. When she eventually moved to Vermont she knew she needed a place for Applejack so the barn and pasture were the main selling points of the little farmstead. Luckily there was also ample room for Zoe's growing menagerie.

It had begun with the donkey, Thistle, whose owner had passed and his family arranged for an estate sale on his property. Zoe immediately fell in love with the donkey despite the fact it was covered in mud roaming a pasture crowded with broken farm equipment and rusted out cars. When Sarah asked what they intended to do with the donkey the family just shrugged so naturally she had to make them an offer or else she would never be able to face her daughter again.

The goats, Rosy and Posy, came next. Their owner's property had been foreclosed on and the auction was a way for the bank to recoup some of their money. There had been several animals on the farm and despite Zoe's unhappy stares Sarah couldn't afford to buy them all. To appease her Sarah ended up buying the goats and chickens who no one else wanted.

Pulling up to the house Sarah quickly released the puppy before setting the three-year-old on her feet. As Sarah went to the cargo area to retrieve her purchases she heard Zoe's exclamation, "Daisy! Don't chase the chickens! No, Daisy!"

Sarah chuckled looking over at the pair as the corgi rounded up the ve chickens in ever-tightening circles while Zoe chased the pup. Sarah kept an eye on them as she carried her purchases from the vehicle and into the house. Once everything was inside and the cold items stored properly Sarah returned outside to see not much progress had been made in either rounding up the chickens or stopping the corgi.

"Come on, Zoe. Time to feed the animals."

"Kay!"

Zoe excitedly followed her mother to the barn. She waited patiently as Sarah led the horse, donkey and goats to their respective stalls. Even the corgi was well-behaved while the animals were stabled. Helping to scoop out each animal's allotted grain Zoe was given the responsibility of feeding the goats who were more her size than the larger equines.

At rst Sarah had been hesitant to allow Zoe in the same pen as she heard goats sometimes had ckle tolerances. But Rosy and Posy seemed to know their current situation was due in large part to the little girl and reciprocated her affection with their own. In fact it had been the same story with Thistle. Donkeys didn't tend to trust people easily but from day one Thistle followed Zoe around the pasture like a puppy. Zoe's ability to charm any animal never ceased to amaze her mother.

"Mommy, can I brush Jack?" Zoe pleaded when all the animals were tucked into their dinner.

"Bring the stool," Sarah chuckled.

Sarah helped set the stool beside the gelding before putting Zoe on it. Brushes in hand they groomed the horse while he ate. This was scene played out almost every night so Jack was quite content with it.

"Applejack's really gentle, isn't he mommy?"

"Yes, he is. He's a good boy." Sarah gave the gelding a fond pat.

"Mommy, know what I heard?"

"What?"

"They are going to have a rodeo at the fair!"

"Is that right?"

"Are you going to enter, mommy?"

"I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Well Jack and I aren't as young as we used to be so we won't be much competition to the younger teams."

"Ah..."

"Why do you want us to enter anyway?"

"Because I want everyone to see you are the bestest mommy in the whole world!"

Sarah laughed, "Well, I'm just happy you think I'm the bestest. I don't need anyone else to know."

Zoe giggled as her mother tickled her before scooping her up. They petted the gelding goodnight before slipping out of his stall. Leaving the animals to their meals they exited with a bucket of scratch grain for the chickens. Zoe held Daisy's collar as her mother poured the grain into pans attracting the chickens into their coop. Once all were accounted for Sarah locked up the coop and herded Zoe and the pup into the house.

"Mommy..."

"Yes?"

"Can I have a pony?"

"Sure. When you're a little bit older."

"Yeah!"

Such was their evening routine. Inside Sarah put away the rest of her purchases before starting dinner. Humming to herself as she pattered in the kitchen Sarah felt at peace. It was amazing how much bliss could be had in simple domestic chores. As she worked she glanced into the living room checking on Zoe as the three-year-old practiced letters and numbers in her workbooks.

Zoe could already spell her name and recognize the words in her picture books. In fact some nights she read the stories to her mother since she knew them by heart. One thing Sarah was immensely proud of was her daughter's insatiable love of books, something any author would insist on when it came to their children.

Zoe was also curious. In fact, she solved the riddle of her mother rather quickly and knew she was actually Rosemary Thomas. Lately she insisted her bedtime stories be Rosemary stories. Sarah was slightly unnerved by this as Rosemary was not meant to be a children's book but did her best to skip over scary or otherwise inappropriate scenes. Besides she could also make up stories rather easily since she knew Rosemary's character so well.

Zoe loved this form of storytelling and peppered her with questions, "What is sky diving like, mommy? Will you take me to the ocean some day? How fast can Applejack really run?"

In addition to knowing Rosemary was her mother's character Zoe also knew Rosemary's many adventures were based in part on her mother's which only made the books better but it made it more dicult to keep secret. Zoe wanted everyone to know about her mother's adventures and no one else could compare.

As Sarah simmered the sauce in preparation for noodles her phone rang. Glancing at the caller ID she answered putting the phone on speaker, "Hey Ruth, you just caught me in the middle of making dinner."

"Don't talk to me about food. I just had the worst meal in history."

"That bad, huh?"

"You have no idea. That's the last time I take anyone's suggestion about restaurants. I'll stick with Good Eats."

Sarah chuckled. Ruth never had a problem with telling people exactly what she thought. It's what made her such a good editor and friend.

"Anyway, I called because as you know I've been trying to come up with a good stunt for your next book, right?"

"Ah-huh."

"So it's the tenth book. We have to do something spectacular and I nally came up with an idea."

"All right. Dazzle me."

"We reveal who the real Rosemary Thomas is to the world!"

Sarah froze feeling the blood drain from her face. Ruth couldn't mean what she thought she meant, could she?

"Sarah? You still there? Too shocking?"

"...What brought this on?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I thought we had a system: the hair, glasses...It's worked for years."

"Yes but...okay full truth? I think the joke has run its course. I get calls all the time. People want to meet Rosemary, the real Rosemary. I also miss my best friend and my niece. And I want the world to know how awe-inspiring you are, how fabulous and charming..."

"Ruth..."

"I'm not the only one who misses you."

"The girls?"

"They ask me about you all the time. You should see the way their faces light up when I talk about you and Zoe."

Sarah bit her lip. She would be lying if she said she didn't miss their companionship as much as they missed hers. When she left New York she cut ties with more than just a neglectful husband and abusive in-laws.

"You don't have to make a decision tonight. But you can't run and hide behind Rosemary forever. Just think about it. Okay?"

"All right. I'll think about it."

"Thanks. I'll let you go. Talk soon."

"Yeah. Good-bye."

Sarah set the phone aside and hurried through the rest of dinner preparations trying to push the conversation out of her mind. But it only came back with more force. Throughout the rest of their nightly routine it lingered, hung over her like a cloud waiting to be acknowledged.

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"Goodnight room. Goodnight moon. Goodnight cow jumping over the moon," Sarah read Margaret Wise Brown's Goodnight Moon with Zoe snuggled up against her. Daisy lay beside them already sound asleep tucked out from the day's outing.

"Goodnight, baby," Sarah whispered kissing Zoe's head as she closed the book and carefully slipped out of bed.

"Goodnight, mommy," Zoe yawned. "Mommy..."

"Yes?" Sarah asked tucking her in.

"What was Auntie Ruth talking about?"

"About what?"

"About Rosemary..."

Sarah sighed kneeling beside the bed. It had been her hope that Zoe was too preoccupied to pay attention to their conversation. After a moment she explained, "She thinks for mommy's tenth book we should do something really special. She wants to announce to the world that I am Rosemary."

"Can we?" Zoe was suddenly wide awake.

"Do you really like that idea?" Sarah asked. "Didn't we just agree to keep it secret?"

"Ye-ah," Zoe sighed. "But I want everyone to know you are the bestest mommy in the world!"

"You know if I do tell everyone I'm Rosemary people will have a lot of questions for me. And I might not be able to spend as much time with you because they will stop us wherever we go."

"I don't mind."

"You say that now..." Sarah sighed. "It's bedtime. We'll talk about it in the morning."

"All right."

Zoe let herself be tucked in again. Planting a kiss on her forehead Sarah said good night before turning off the light and stepping out. Retreating downstairs Sarah made a cup of tea and headed to her writing nook.

The small desk was situated in front of a large window overlooking the backyard. She could just make out the play set she had installed for Zoe in the fading light. Sitting down she started up her laptop but sat staring at the screen unable to focus. Her mind kept swirling with questions. Should she do it?

What would people think?

Would they be disappointed?

What would Lucas think?

Would he be upset she didn't disappear like he wanted?

What would she do if she saw him again?

Frustrated she stood pacing the living room in front of the replace. Why did she even care what he thought? They were strangers now. That's what she promised herself when she left. She had Zoe and he had...Madeline. An even trade. Right?

Given how drunk he was he probably didn't even remember their one night together, a night she tried desperately to forget. What was more he certainly wouldn't recognize himself in Zoe. The three-year-old looked exactly like Sarah, everyone said so. Only Sarah saw the slight difference in the slope of Zoe's nose and the shape of her lips. It was highly unlikely Lucas would notice even if he did see her.

Sarah had done everything she could to remove herself from her old life. She no longer went by Stanton or Tomlinson. Her last name was ocally Thomas and no one who knew her now knew her by any other. Zoe knew nothing about her past accepting their hometown as the only one. But now it all seemed like papier-mâché instead of the walls she imagined. She didn't want Zoe to know the truth about what she left and why. She didn't want Zoe to think her mother was not the strong gure she imagined.

What should she do?

Sarah stopped pacing and turned to gaze at the large painting over the mantel. It was a quick, seemingly effortless work, a landscape featuring a wide lake and autumn trees. Everything was rendered with fast, sure brushstrokes. It was a gift from Aubrey who was as fearless as her style.

That's right, Aubrey never let anyone tell her who she was or what she could or couldn't do.

When Aubrey found out she was pregnant she didn't whine about not having a man in her life to help her raise her baby boy. She just did it and she did it while still making her art. What would Aubrey do? For that matter...what would Rosemary do?

Sarah turned back to her desk. Sitting back down in front of her laptop she read the words on the screen.

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I tucked Daisy in kissing my beloved daughter on the forehead. Quietly shutting the door I ignored Harold as the spirit followed me downstairs and sat across from me at the kitchen table. Other spirits wandered in and out of my peripheral but Harold was the only one wanting to express himself. I was tempted to grab the Ouija board just to see what he had to say.

When Daisy was born I had retreated to my cabin in the Bayou enjoying motherhood and ignoring the rest of the world as it continued on its way but the world had a way of nding you no matter how hard one chose to hide.

My phone chirped with a new notification as another person asked about living with spirits or what to do with a resident being who didn't want to share its space. For three years I limited my activities to online advice and avoided the spotlight but now my friend told me about a new client with a rather particular problem. My friend was having diculty managing it and needed help.

There was no question of going, but should I take Daisy? What would Daisy think of my profession? I would have to take precautions to ensure no spirits formed attachments but that was nothing new. Harold was a rare exception.

It was time...Rosemary was returning to the world.

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Sarah leaned back. Back into the world, huh?

Maybe it was time. Kyle could handle the shop, no problem. She needed to nd someone to feed and care for the animals. It would only be for a couple weeks at the most. Then they'd come back home. Sarah bit her lip and reached for her phone.

There was no turning back once she sent the message.