



The
Blooming
of
Delphinium

*A Moonberry
Lake Novel*

HOLLY VARNI

Praise for *On Moonberry Lake*

“Varni delivers a solid debut focusing on the stories of ordinary Midwesterners. Readers will appreciate the small-town flavor and humorous anecdotes.”

Library Journal

“This novel is a love letter to small towns and unlikely friendships, to the family you build around you and the faith you make your own.”

Reading Is My Superpower

“The author has a way of describing people that really brings them to life. This book brings people closer to one another and encourages them to make connections.”

Compass Book Ratings

“*On Moonberry Lake* is sure to sweep you up and away with characters who will reach into your soul and make you long for friends just like them.”

Interviews & Reviews

“Delightful! Charming! Full of characters who take up residence in your heart. The best of ‘News from Lake Wobegon’ and Father Tim combined.”

Lauraine Snelling, bestselling author
of the Red River of the North series

“An uplifting novel about the power of small-town community.”

Suzanne Woods Fisher, bestselling author of *The Sweet Life*

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a division of Baker Publishing Group
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Holly Varni, *The Blooming of Delphinium*

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To my James
There is nothing better than the sound of your voice
and your scent—other than your love.

*The most precious gift we can offer others is
our presence.*

*When mindfulness embraces those we love,
they will bloom like flowers.*

Thich Nhat Hanh

One

Delphinium Hayes could identify the goodness—or wickedness—of a person by their scent. With the slightest passing whiff, she immediately knew someone’s most admirable or weediest characteristic.

Generosity had the full-bodied boldness of lilies. Kindness possessed the reserved yet intense fragrance of pink azaleas. Humility smelled of lilies of the valley. Those who had a great sense of humor or who were natural storytellers conspicuously reeked of poppies. And people who were good at keeping secrets were rose-scented.

When the smell of rhododendron wafted around a person, it was a dead giveaway that the individual was vain and selfish. Bullies who insisted on getting their way stank of onion weed, liars were always oleander, and wisteria sprang up from hypochondriacs.

Delphinium used her ability to her advantage. She knew which buyer at her flower shop would be good to work with and which would cheat her. She had the dearest and most trustworthy friends, and customers marveled at her knack for giving them exactly what they were seeking. Her acute sensitivity was her intuition and guide, telling her someone’s true character before they even spoke. This perception never failed.

Until it did.



Lugging a ceramic planter she'd found in her favorite store, Fine Antiques, Heirlooms & Collectibles, Delphinium calculated the number of steps she had yet to go before reaching her own shop and wondered if her sweaty grip would hold out. Her tangled mass of red hair refused to be tamed in the oppressive summer humidity and escaped in corkscrews from her bun, making the center look like a matted nest. She only needed bird eggs burrowed within it to be the perfect home to a family of chickadees.

Though her namesake flower came from the azure shade of her eyes, her hair, compassion, and intuition came from her beloved grandmother, Annie. Delphinium could still picture the old woman's white hair springing out of her head like fusilli pasta, making a near-audible *boing* as she moved.

Delphinium smiled wistfully as she adjusted her grip. How her grandmother would have loved to go antique shopping and find such a treasure. She let out a heavy sigh. The lingering grief from the absence of her kindred spirit pressed on her chest. Annie was the only person who had truly understood her—she not only believed in Delphinium's ability but celebrated it.

Annie had known what it was like to be different, or at least to feel that way. She had lived with a form of synesthesia where she saw color and even tasted flavor for every letter and number. The letter *A* was red, *O* was white, *P* was orange, and *E* was teal. The number *5* was blue, and *2* was green. When her grandmother bit into a brownie, she tasted purple. All the mundane components within ordinary life were an assault on the senses, an exploding rainbow always in front of her eyes or on her tongue.

As a little girl, Delphinium had wanted to be just like Annie and was devastated when *K* didn't appear magenta or when she couldn't taste saffron when she saw *47*.

However, her consolation prize of genetics, or her "gifting," as Annie insisted on calling it, was her ability to smell fragrances that

were nearly imperceptible to everyone else. Scents not created by perfume or soap but what a person emitted naturally.

In a small way, Delphinium felt like she had a superpower too, and that was her link to her grandmother. Instead of seeing colors, she smelled personality traits. No matter how faint, Delphinium was able to detect a fragrance linked to the person's most dominant characteristic. All she had to do was get a whiff for the insight.

Delphinium blew out a sharp breath to move a bouncing curl from her line of vision. The stagnant, muggy late-June air melted not only her eyeliner but her patience as well. Every passerby looked as wilted as she felt. The humidity made it hard to breathe. Her nose wrinkled as a puff of petunia wafted from a man who walked past her, appearing equally annoyed with the foul weather as she was. Petunia always indicated anger and resentment.

Feeling a trickle of sweat trail down the hollow of her back, she held the cumbersome planter in a protective cradle, determined not to let it slip from her grasp. The front of her shirt was going to be badly wrinkled from dampness.

Delphinium groaned. *Why couldn't I have waited for it to be delivered? Why can't I ever simply wait?*

She knew the answer, of course. When it came to her beloved store, she possessed the tolerance of a toddler. As soon as she had seen the beautiful hand-painted planter dreadfully misplaced and abandoned on the bottom shelf of the antique store, she envisioned the exact plant she was going to put in it—bird of paradise—and the price she'd get for the match. The three-block jaunt to her shop would pay off.

Surely it would turn a nice profit.

That's why she was heaving this monstrosity down Main Street, she told herself. She'd rather be more creative and come up with lucrative arrangements customers couldn't resist than hike up all her prices to pay the mortgage on her corner property. Her dire financial state only meant she needed to up her game in presentation and quality.

Giving herself little pep talks calmed her down when she was

anxious and helped her lift her head proudly in these moments when she knew she looked like a hot mess.

Literally.

Main Street was the heart of the small Northwoods town of Moonberry Lake, Minnesota, and she knew she and the oversized planter made quite a spectacle. Having ogling eyes was known as perfect vision in the small town. Delphinium was accustomed to her family feeding the gossip mill.

Annie had been a regular topic among coffee shop discussions. Being quirky or, rather, having an “artistic flair,” as Annie described it, attracted stares. “The price for not being ordinary,” she’d say, waving a bit too enthusiastically toward scrutinizing eyes. “Be proud to be the *spectacle*, not the spectator, sweetheart.”

Delphinium’s shoulders relaxed a bit as she approached the shop. She pushed open the door, and it dragged, sticking halfway. With a grunt and a swift kick, she budged the door another inch, allowing her to escape the outside heat.

“Paavo! The door is sticking!”

Placing the planter down on the counter carefully, she shouted again, “Paavo, where are you?”

Wiping away the strands of hair stuck to her sweaty forehead, she headed to the storage area and back room. Paavo was standing at the worktable, pulling thorns out of a shipment of roses. Although he had his earbuds in, she could hear the distant clamor of music from ten feet away. She walked closer and waved her arms. He pulled out one of the earbuds.

“Oh hey, Miz D. I didn’t hear you come in.”

Between his earnest smile and the chilly air-conditioning, her annoyance dissipated quickly. “Paavo, didn’t you notice that the front door sticks?”

The teen shook his head. “Nope. I came in through the back door. There’s nothing wrong with that door.”

“Well, the *front* door, which coincidentally is the entrance to the business, drags like it’s being pushed through taffy.”

An ornery voice spoke from behind her. “That’s because this horrid weather is making the wood expand. Everything swells up. My fingers are like sausages!” Henry, her right hand in this business, must have been one minute behind her. He came in regularly to check that everything was running “shipshape.”

“Good morning, Henry.”

The elderly man tipped an imaginary hat at her in greeting. “That flowerpot out there is a pretty one. You’ll get a good price with the right plant.”

Delphinium smiled. Great minds think alike. “Checking on me this early?”

Tight-lipped, the man shook his head, his jowls hanging slightly below his jawline.

She didn’t miss the quick glance between Henry and Paavo. “What?” she asked. “What are you guys not telling me?”

Paavo grinned at Henry. “They’re in the refrigerator.”

“What’s in the refrigerator?” she asked.

But before either of them could respond, Delphinium strode over to the floor-to-ceiling cooler door. After pulling it open, she stared at the contents, turned around, and marched back to her two employees, hands on her hips.

“Does someone want to tell me why there are three *men* in my refrigerator?”

A huge smile spread across Paavo’s face. “They’re playing cards.” She felt her mouth open.

“Now, Delphi, hold on a second,” Henry began, but she was already marching back to the oversized refrigerator.

Opening the door again, she studied the three elderly, half-dressed men sitting on upside-down tall, white buckets. “Excuse me, gentlemen, but why are you playing cards in my walk-in fridge?”

Hunched in concentration, two of the men didn’t even look up from their hands, and the one who did answered her question with a question. “Why do you look like a raccoon?” His face contorted.

Henry stepped to her side, draping an arm around her shoulders.

“The answer to both questions is that it’s blazing hot outside and we’re all melting.” He looked her in the eyes. “Your makeup runs clean down your face in this temperature, but for us, we’re at risk of melting into a clump of wax. We needed a place to play poker where we wouldn’t die doing it, and I suggested here. It’s the coolest place in town.”

Delphinium wasn’t following his logic. “What’s wrong with The Gardens?” Henry’s typical hangout was the game room at the assisted living facility where all the men lived.

With a scowl etched into his face, man number two spoke up. “The air-conditioning is out everywhere except the dining hall, so they tried to herd us all in there like cattle. The room is a mass overcrowding of wheelchairs and sleepyheads. And the director only allows cards if we don’t gamble. There’s no fun if there ain’t somethin’ at stake.”

“This is a free country and I’ll gamble if I want to. It’s my right!” barked one of the other men, still not looking up from his cards.

“We should know. We fought for this country. We fought to be able to gamble, and that director is unpatriotic for denying us that right!” the third man piped in with a fight in his tone. The other men grumbled in agreement.

“All right, boys, simmer down,” Henry interjected. “Delphi is fine with us being here.”

Delphinium whipped her head to the side to gawk at him. “I never said that!”

He patted her on the back. “We just need to give her time to get used to having the walking dead in her cooler.”

All the men chuckled.

Poker Player Number One, the grumpy man who had pointed out what a mess she was, looked up at her again. “We’re being *preserved* in here instead of turning into a liquefied mess like the others down at the home.”

Delphinium scrutinized him. “So how long will this *preservation* take?”

“Forever!” he shouted.

“Anarchy!” Poker Player Number Two added, raising one fist in the air.

“Jump ship!” Poker Player Number Three yelled.

Delphinium turned to Henry, who smiled crookedly at the feisty behavior of his buddies. He shrugged as if to say he had no control over what was happening in her shop. “I guess that’s your answer. Any other questions?” The goofy grin on his face indicated he was enjoying their rebellion.

Delphinium whispered in Henry’s good ear. “Why must they all be in their undershirts?” She looked back at the men in their too-thin white tank tops. “Are you playing strip poker?”

“Oh no, it’s just more comfortable this way.” Henry winked, then stepped inside the giant cooler and began unbuttoning his own shirt. “The fact that this cooler only runs on half its cylinders makes it the ideal temp.”

She frowned at the reminder of another expense. “It’s on the list to fix.”

“Don’t. It’s the perfect breeze in here.” He smiled.

She sighed, her shoulders lowering in defeat, knowing this was no battle to fight. She felt totally drained, and it wasn’t even ten o’clock. With a roll of her eyes, she turned and left the men to their game.

“Shut the door!” they yelled in unison.

She went back and closed the door, shaking her head. *What am I going to do with a refrigerator full of elderly men?*

She let out another long sigh. “I need to find a person who’s a hydrangea,” she muttered as she passed Paavo on her way to open the shop.

He paused in putting his earbud back in. “What’s a hydrangea?”

“Hydrangeas are always team players. I need someone to take my side and agree that this place is out of control!” she said over her shoulder.

She reached the front counter, then absentmindedly opened

the drawer where Paavo always put the mail. The sight of three words stamped in red on the top envelope caused her to close the drawer just as fast.

Notice of Foreclosure.

The beating of her heart thumped loudly, and her head began to swim.

It's just the heat. She drew in a breath and focused on the expansion of her lungs.

Opening the drawer again, she glanced at the envelope, willing the printed red words to change.

They didn't.

They might as well have been stamped in blood by the way her heart ached.

The reality of eviction was getting dire. Things were going from bad to worse.

She slammed the drawer shut.

Breathe.

Just breathe.