

Turn the page to read
Karen Kingsbury's short story

the
BEGINNING

CHAPTER ONE

Fall 1971

The pains began at two thirty in the morning.

A sharp, twisting sort of pain that woke up Donna Barton and sent panic coursing through her veins.

“Charlie!” She screamed his name, and immediately he sat up in bed beside her.

“What?” He was breathless, frantic. Ready to carry her to safety or tackle monsters on her behalf. For a few seconds he looked from one side of the room to the other getting his bearings. Then he seemed to remember. His eyes met hers. “The baby!” Even in the dim moonlight it was easy to see the color leave his face. “Is it time?”

Donna closed her eyes. The pain moved in waves down her stomach, across her lower spine. She tightened her legs, fighting it. “I’m . . . not sure.”

“It must be.” He threw off the covers and ran across the room to a small heap on the floor. Yesterday’s clothes. He pulled on the pair of shorts and T-shirt.

Sweat beaded on her forehead. *Hurry, Charlie. Hurry.* This was the hottest North Carolina fall in fifty-two years. The heat and humidity made her feel like she was underwater.

He ran to her, his eyes wide. “Your bag’s ready. Stay here. I’ll get your clothes.”

Something cool. She needed something cool. “Maybe my—” Her pain doubled. “Charlie!” Fear mixed with desperation. Each word came slowly. “What if . . . what if it’s too . . . strong?”

“It’s not . . . it’s normal.” His voice was higher than before, strained and breathy. Like he was trying to convince himself. “We have to get you to the hospital.”

The pain didn’t fade like Donna expected a contraction might do.

Normal.

Yes, that was what she was feeling. This pain was good and right and normal. Pains that would bring

their baby into the world and make them a family. A beautiful pain that would erase all the pain she'd already lived through. They needed to go. She would wear her nightgown. She slid her feet onto the floor, but her lungs refused to work. "Help . . . me!"

"Baby, don't move!" Charlie was at her side, her bag flung over his shoulder. "I'll carry you."

Donna felt her body go limp as he scooped her into his arms. Her breaths came in short, shallow gasps. "I'm . . . scared."

"Hold on . . . I'll get you there."

She couldn't keep her eyes open. Somewhere in the back alleys of her mind she felt herself moving, felt him carrying her. But the pain became a thick, dark, suffocating lava, pulling her in, covering her, consuming her. His voice was only a faint whisper now, and finally she couldn't fight the pull another minute.

In the blackness that overcame her, she reminded herself once more of the truth. This was a good pain. Her past swirled before her, the terrible sad reality alive again. Before the chapter when she met Charlie Barton, Donna's story was dark and depressing, one pathetic page after another. The only child of a couple of drug addicts, Donna never stood a chance. Other boys and

girls went home to hugs and help with homework.

Not Donna.

She would walk through the front door to her parents crashed on the floor or keeled over on the dirty sofa. Drugs sat in the open, plastic bags of white powder and dark green crushed leaves. Needles and mirrors and razor blades and matches. It was the sixties, but even so, Donna's parents were ahead of the drug game.

Donna wanted nothing to do with their world, so she found one of her own. The world of books. She earned straight As and didn't come home from school until she absolutely had to. None of her teachers was surprised when Donna earned valedictorian honors or when she received a full-ride scholarship to North Carolina State. Donna was tempted to believe that the sad parts of her story were behind her.

She was wrong. Her mom overdosed on heroin three days before her graduation.

Donna's English teacher took her in until she headed off for North Carolina, but left alone, her father didn't handle the loss well. A month later he went out one night with his friends and never came home. Police found his car wrapped around a tree the next morning. And like that, Donna was alone in the world.

That was real pain. The pain that lived within for years after, one that came back without warning, taking her breath away with its severity.

This . . . this aching, stabbing, tightening . . . this was life. A variation of the sort of happy reds and vibrant oranges and brilliant blues that had colored her existence since God led her to Charlie Barton. She let herself focus on the beginning, the first day she saw Charlie. Within minutes of meeting him he made her do something as foreign as it was fantastic.

He made her laugh.

Charlie was the only son of a local cement contractor, but despite his father's mandate, he had no intention of pouring cement for a living. Charlie was innovative and sensitive. When he earned his degree in business it created a rift between him and his father that still remained. The broken relationship reminded Charlie of a thousand times growing up when his father would discourage his academics and the craziest thing of all.

His dad forbade him to read.

The rule only made Charlie more determined. He'd sneak books into his backpack from the school library and read them under the covers by flashlight late at

night. Books opened a new world to Charlie, a world of *Tom Sawyer* and *Robinson Crusoe* and *Treasure Island*.

But books remained a secret for Charlie. Only after he and Donna had been dating for several months did he tell her about his private love for stories, and his greatest dream of all.

The dream of opening a bookstore.

Her memories mixed together in the darkness. Just last week Charlie had called his father, looking to make amends. Instead the man had lit into him, berating him and reminding him that he would never amount to anything. That he was a failure. *You're a Barton, and Bartons aren't businesspeople. You'll fail, and then you'll come crawling back to me and the cement.*

A knife couldn't have left deeper scars.

Donna's pain grew stronger, twisting her insides and burning through her body. She needed to get to the hospital. Giving birth shouldn't feel like this, right? Maybe she was dying. She wasn't sure. Her thoughts were less clear now, less organized. They swirled and faded and grew more distant until only two things remained.

Her pain and the darkness.

CHAPTER TWO

The bad feeling plagued Edna Carlton from the moment she got out of bed.

She opened her eyes, stretched her legs to the empty side of the mattress, and like a sudden storm, it hit her. A sense of doom, or despair. Darker than despair. Outside her bedroom window a pair of bluebirds swapped familiar songs, and the smell of sweet jasmine wafted on a cool breeze through the screen. The day looked perfect, beautiful. Everything in all of life was fine.

So why did she suddenly feel like the world was ending?

Edna climbed out of bed and walked to the kitchen. Coffee. That's what she needed . . . fresh coffee. She

added water to the kettle and turned on the flame beneath it. The jar of instant Maxwell House sat nearby. A couple of spoonfuls of the dark granules in the bottom of her grandmother's china teacup and she was ready to go.

She stared out the back window of her small apartment. The only thing louder than the silence was her fear, closing in on her, reminding her that she was alone. Tom didn't have a break until Christmas—if then. For a long moment she closed her eyes and tried to remember the last time she'd gotten a letter from him. A week at least, longer than usual.

Maybe that explained the ominous feeling. Letters were the only reminder that he was still alive, still fighting battles in Vietnam, still doing what he felt called to do as an American citizen. Tom . . . the love of her life.

The Bible talked about two becoming one, and their friends used to tease how that was never truer than for Edna and Tom. They were right. Sometimes Edna couldn't figure out where Tom ended and she began. They were that close, that inseparable.

Before he went to war, anyway.

The kettle rattled and a low whistle began. She flipped off the flame and poured water into the cup. Beneath her feet the linoleum was cold, typical for late fall in Frank-

lin, Tennessee. But this morning it spread a chill up her body and into her bones. Her teeth chattered as she brought the hot cup to her face and breathed in.

What was this oppressive feeling? Why today? She held onto the cup with both hands, letting the heat work its way through her. The calendar on the wall seemed to taunt her, reminding her how long six months really was. Six frightening, painful, lonely months. She studied October's little boxes, stared at the place where the square white pages hung near the refrigerator. If only she could look ahead and know the future. Peek in on the time when Tom would be home and they could truly begin their life together.

They'd only been married three weeks when he shipped out.

She sipped her coffee and let herself go back to the beginning. The way she often did when she missed him. Through grade school, Tom had been the one person Edna couldn't tolerate. Every recess he would run by and tug on her blond ponytail or tease her for being too slow or too smart or any of a dozen reasons. She did everything she could to fly under his radar.

The summer before middle school, Edna begged her mother to enroll her in a different district so she

wouldn't have to spend the next three years taking classes with Tom Carlton. Her mother only rolled her eyes and told her what she always told her.

"That boy has a crush on you, Edna. I keep telling you."

Edna wanted to wear a disguise the first day of classes, but instead she connected with a group of her girlfriends and hoped for safety in numbers. The plan worked the first week, but the next Monday Tom came up behind her and flicked her hair.

"Hey . . . haven't seen you."

Edna turned and felt her cheeks grow hot. "I . . . I've been busy."

"Oh." He grinned at her. "Well . . . in case I don't see you around, you should probably know."

Confusion added to her nervousness. "Know what?"

He started to run off, but as he did he winked at her. "You're the prettiest girl in sixth grade."

She literally stopped in place, suddenly not sure which class she was heading to, which way was up. It had never occurred to her after all these years that her mother might be right. After that, she still did her best to avoid Tom Carlton. But by the end of the year she was no longer afraid of him, and in seventh grade they had become friends.

Tom liked to say it took him most of his life to get up the courage to ask her out, but when their freshman year in high school came and the football team had its annual bonfire, he sat beside her. After two hours of small talk he did what he'd wanted to do as far back as he could remember.

He asked her out.

They were inseparable after that, the sort of couple people smiled at when they walked past. Their senior year they were voted homecoming king and queen, and after the dance Tom asked her to marry him. Their future looked brighter than the lights on Broadway in downtown Nashville. Only one thing threatened to dim them.

The draft.

Tom turned nineteen the summer after high school, and a month later he was drafted to join the army offensive in Vietnam. While many of their friends enrolled in college, became conscientious objectors, or feigned injuries and illnesses to avoid serving the United States, Tom wouldn't hear of it.

"If I'm asked to serve, I'll serve." His smile was tinged with sadness. "We'll get married before I go." He pulled her close and kissed her. "I'll get my years of serving out of the way. Then we'll start real life."

Six more months and he'd be finished with his tour, done with fighting. Six months. Another sip of coffee. Just a bad dream, that's all. Her husband was fighting half a world away. Of course she'd have bad dreams now and then. She tried to keep her fingers from shaking. But if it was only a bad dream, why wasn't the awful feeling gone? Instead, the feeling suffocated her, its tenacious claws set deep.

Half a cup of coffee in slow, nervous sips, and finally she made a plan. She would clean the apartment. Not the usual washing down the kitchen and folding laundry, but deep cleaning. The baseboards along the hallway and the dust on the top rims of the photo frames. A cleaning that would take her all day, and by the time sunset came she would've worked the bad feeling out of her system.

Edna grabbed a spray bottle and a rag and headed for the bathroom. She was on her hands and knees washing the floor at the base of the toilet when she heard the doorbell.

The smell of Pine-Sol, the feel of the wet rag in her hands, the pinch of tiled floor against her knees, all of it froze into a single instant, a moment she absolutely knew she would remember forever. *Don't get up,*

Edna . . . Don't do it. Don't answer the door. She closed her eyes but the doorbell rang again, and she couldn't stop herself. Couldn't keep from scrambling to her feet and hurrying blindly to the front of the apartment.

She didn't check the peephole, didn't stop to see who was on the other side. She already knew. This was the reason for the feeling, the doom that had smothered her since she opened her eyes that morning. *Not Tom, God . . . please . . . not Tom.* He only has six more months . . .

Her rebel hand defied her heart and suddenly the door was open, and there they were. Two sad-eyed, fresh-faced soldiers in sharply pressed uniforms. One of them had a telegram.

"No!" she shouted. Spots danced in front of her eyes and they quickly began to connect. She couldn't breathe or move or remember where she was. "Not Tom!"

They were the last words she remembered saying. She began to fall, but she didn't care. The floor could take her life and that would be a relief compared to living in a world without her Tom. One final thought screamed at her before she passed out. The date. October 5, 1971. A date that would stand forever as a dividing line in time.

Life before the doorbell rang, and life after.

CHAPTER THREE

The baby was a girl.

That's what they told Donna when she woke up. Charlie was at her side, tears streaming down his cheeks. He pressed his face close to hers. "You're alive . . . I can't believe you're alive."

She felt weak and thin. Too thin. "What . . . what happened?"

Charlie eased back, his eyes wide. For the first time since she'd known him, the confident sparkle in his eyes was gone. In its place was a fear that made him look like a different man altogether. "You almost died."

“The baby, Charlie. What happened to our baby?”

His silence told her more than his words ever could. He swallowed and let his eyes find a spot on the floor. For a long time he only shook his head, as if the details were too awful to speak. But eventually the story came. In tragic bits and terrible pieces, it came.

The contractions were too strong; Donna had been right. Something had gone wrong on the inside, and she had started bleeding—so much that her body had gone into shock and the bleeding became profuse. Every organ, every cell, bleeding out. D-I-C, Charlie called it. He couldn't remember what it stood for. Or why it happened.

“It took . . . everyone in the emergency room, Donna. No one thought you were going to—”

He couldn't say the words. Donna's heartbeat slammed around in her chest. “The baby, Charlie . . . tell me.”

Again he shook his head. “She . . . she didn't make it.” He looked through her, to the places in her soul where only he was allowed. “They couldn't save her.”

Donna squeezed her eyes shut. She couldn't acknowledge her daughter's death without first acknowledging the most beautiful part of the story.

They'd had a daughter. He was saying something about her blood loss, but Donna couldn't make out the words. Her question cut him off midsentence. "Charlie . . . What did she look like?"

Charlie stopped talking.

Her eyes flew open. "Please, Charlie. Tell me what she looked like."

A series of sobs shook him and he hung his head, his hands over his face. After a minute he found his voice. "She was perfect . . . I only saw her for a minute. She . . . she looked just like you, Donna."

Her baby girl looked like her! Where was she, then? Where was her baby now? How dare someone take her away without letting Donna hold her first? She wanted to ask, wanted to know what cruel doctor had taken her daughter's body without her permission. But the questions pummeled her heart and left her exhausted. Too defeated to speak.

Charlie stroked her damp hair and brought his face close to hers again. "We'll get through this . . . we will."

Before Donna could consider the possibility, the doctor walked into the room. His expression didn't look much better than Charlie's. "Mrs. Barton . . . I'm so sorry."

With all her remaining energy she opened the palm of her hand and stretched out her fingers. Charlie covered her hand with his own, wrapping her fingers with his, skin to skin. The doctor was saying something about their baby's body being disposed of at the morgue.

"What . . . what about a funeral?"

The doctor blinked, his mouth slightly open. "That . . . that isn't how we do things. Your baby was born dead, Mrs. Barton."

"She deserves a funeral."

Only then did Donna realize she hadn't cried yet. Her eyes were dry, paralyzed with the news. But at the realization that her daughter was already gone, that there would be no baby to hold, no body to bury, sobs gathered in her chest and a river of sadness began flowing from her eyes.

"Thank you, Doctor," Charlie held her hand more tightly, "for saving Donna's life."

Her husband's relief touched her, but it didn't ease the pain. And then, as if there were room inside her for more heartache, the doctor delivered the final blow. "We had to remove your uterus, Mrs. Barton." He looked like he'd rather stop practicing medicine

than say this next part. “You won’t be able to have more children. I’m . . . so sorry.”

Donna didn’t hear what came after that. She closed her eyes and turned toward Charlie, only Charlie. Their daughter was dead, and there would be no babies, not ever. No children running through their home, no sweet laughter, no trips to the park. Just her and Charlie and the empty days that lay ahead.

Time wouldn’t stop for her heartbreak. Somehow, without her approval, the days marched on, a series of unforgiving sunrises fading into a blur of sunsets. From her first day back in their North Carolina townhouse, Donna knew one thing for certain: If Charlie was right, if they were going to be okay, then they needed a reason to live. Charlie’s father had learned of the tragedy and he’d reached out, called Charlie to come home, back to the cement business. But Charlie politely declined. His father called him a fool, and the rift was back.

Alone again, just them and God against the world, they took long walks while Donna tried to regain her strength. Eventually they came up with a plan. Their own pain would grow dim if only they could find a way to help other people. What they needed was

something to pour all their energy and love, their passion and longing, into. Something that would take the place of the family they'd never have. It took six weeks before the idea hit them. By then they had searched the map for a new home, a new beginning, and every search led them to the same place.

Franklin, Tennessee.

Franklin with its small-town feel just twenty minutes south of Nashville's Music Row. Main Street was expanding. A mercantile, a theater, a bank, and three cafés. They could live a few blocks away and figure out how to help, a way to be part of the foundation of a town on the rise.

If only they could help people who were hurting. She and Charlie could pour into their lives, listen to their stories, and point them in the right direction. If they could be a part of changing the lives of others, then their own pain was sure to grow dim.

They would find a church once they arrived in town, but that wasn't where their helping would happen. Not at an orphanage or a homeless shelter. They didn't feel God calling them to either of those places. Their help would happen somewhere else, at

the most likely place of all. At a place she and Charlie could believe in.

A bookstore.

A small-town bookstore would bridge the pain of yesterday to the promise of tomorrow. By the end of the year they found just the building, a small two-story house on Franklin's Main Street, a place that had long ago housed Civil War soldiers. It was made of brick and old pine, and it smelled faintly like Lemon Pledge and campfire smoke, a smell that welcomed them from the first time they toured it. They were approved for a business loan, and like that, the catharsis began. With every painted wall and built-in bookshelf, Donna could feel God healing them, sense Him smiling down.

Because the bookstore would absolutely change lives.

No question, somewhere, someone else needed a bridge in his or her own life, a way to find hope for the future. Because of that, when it came time to open their doors, the bookstore's name was already decided.

They called it The Bridge.

CHAPTER FOUR

The days blended one into the other. One month after another.

Some days Edna didn't get out of bed. She would lay on her side, her knees curled up to her waist, holding tight to one of Tom's T-shirts, clinging to it, cradling the soft worn cotton to her chest. Her parents had moved up north to New Hampshire after Edna's high school graduation. They were crushed by the news that Tom had been killed in action. The next day they flew down and stayed for Tom's funeral. But after a week they had to return to their lives.

Edna understood.

“Spend time with friends, dear. That’s all you can do.” Her mom looked stricken as she kissed her cheek on the way out. “You could always move up north with us.”

But that was never really an option. She and Tom had picked out this apartment together and they had lived here, husband and wife, for three weeks. Three whole weeks of laughter and bliss and happily ever after. Their entire married life. Tom liked the view of the park from the window and the way it was only a couple of blocks’ walk to Main Street and downtown Franklin. She could still see him sitting at the kitchen table.

If Edna moved now, she would lose all that remained of him.

Her mom was right about her friends. They were there and they were willing. The problem was hers. Most of the time she didn’t answer the door when they came to call, too busy staring into space and trying to remember how to walk without falling to the floor in pain.

Her heart was that broken.

After a few months, her friends came less often. When Edna would invite one of them in for a cup of

coffee, the conversation was always awkward. They would forever feel sorry for her, and she would forever be the victim. When the New Year rolled around, Edna was still talking to Tom's photograph before she fell asleep. Still terrified about tomorrow. Still waking up each morning to the truth about Tom's death hitting her all over again.

But she was running out of money. That was the only reason she had to finally get dressed and leave the apartment. The stipend given to her by the army for Tom's death while on active duty was running out. Still the process of leaving the house was slow. Day after day she tried and failed.

She had no idea where to work or what she would do. She had no skills to speak of, no training. Before Tom's death she watched two neighbor kids to supplement Tom's military income. Babysitting was out of the question now. She couldn't focus long enough to remember what day it was, let alone take on the responsibility of watching children. Especially when she and Tom would never have any of their own. Lying in her bed she only knew that she wanted to work somewhere on Main Street—Tom's favorite place.

It took four painful days to go from forming a plan

to actually stepping through the front door and walking to Main Street. But on that fourth day Edna actually did it. She got dressed, did her hair, and walked to Main Street. The café wasn't hiring, and neither was Cal's Drugstore. But at the mercantile, Edna met the manager near the front counter. The woman was kind with gray hair and bright eyes.

"Hello." She held out her hand. "I'm Edna Carlton. I . . . need a job. If you're hiring, that is." Her words sounded forced and awkward. She stepped back, her knees shaking.

"Hmm." She studied Edna for a quick moment. "I *am* looking for someone to ring sales in the afternoons. I'm supposed to be retired." She smiled sweetly. "Minimum wage, but room for advancement."

Edna wasn't sure what to say, but she knew one thing—she had to be honest. "I . . . don't know how to ring sales."

"Oh, dear, I can train you on that. I'm looking for friendly and teachable. And I have a hunch you're all of that."

"Yes, ma'am." Edna stood a little straighter. "Can I fill out an application?"

“Tell you what.” She pointed to the back of the store where the soda fountain always drew a crowd. “Let’s sit and have a milkshake. Half an hour from now I’ll have what I need to know.”

Edna smiled, a feeling she’d almost forgotten. An hour later she had an apron and a job. When she stepped outside onto Main Street and started north toward her apartment she realized something.

She had only thought about Tom a few times in the last hour. That, and she was walking and breathing and taking on responsibility like a regular person. It was the first time she had even the slightest glimmer of hope that she might survive. Even so she cried herself to sleep, desperate to tell Tom about her new job and the way she was trying to meet life head-on.

Not until she’d been working for a week did she notice the bookstore.

It looked quaint and cute, a storefront with a brand-new sign, just a few doors down from the mercantile. She came closer and read the wording in the window. Disappointment settled over her. It had closed ten minutes earlier, but as she stood outside the place, gradually a thought came to light in Edna’s soul.

She had forgotten about books.

Maybe that was the answer. She might not have much of a life of her own, but every book would be another escape, a way to live without actually having to do anything more than read.

Edna stared at the place, at the warm light in the windows, and she made up her mind. Tomorrow before work she would visit the bookstore. She had a feeling she would like being inside. The shelves were full, and in the back of the place she could see a worn leather sofa and a chair near a fireplace. She even liked the name.

The Bridge.

As she walked home she realized she had reached another benchmark, another signpost on her journey to living again. She was no longer afraid of tomorrow.

At least in this moment, she was actually looking forward to it.

CHAPTER FIVE

The grand opening of The Bridge happened the first weekend of January 1972. In some ways, Donna couldn't believe how quickly God had given them their dream. The craziness of moving to Franklin and getting the business loan, buying the building and re-doing the inside so it would be the cozy, welcoming bookstore they wanted it to be. All of it seemed to happen in a blur.

A blur that kept Donna from missing her baby girl in all but the latest hours of the night. Hours when she should've been feeding her or rocking her or sing-

ing her quiet songs about Jesus. Cradling her close in a pink blanket.

Charlie was so happy about The Bridge, he almost never talked about the heartache they left behind in North Carolina. He never cried late at night the way she did, at least she never heard him. Donna kept her tears to herself. They were getting on, moving ahead with life. If the tears came at night, so be it. She would probably always cry when she thought about their baby girl.

But in the daytime, their new life as bookstore owners was too exciting to do anything but celebrate. They stocked the shelves with every sort of fiction and nonfiction title. There were books about war and books about peace, volumes on making a casserole and tales of historical fiction. American favorites, British classics, and contemporary fiction.

Donna's favorite part of the bookstore was the front room with the sofa and chair they'd purchased for around the fireplace. The welcome feeling was immediate as soon as a customer walked through the door. *Come in. Sit a while. Take your time.* Words Donna and Charlie told their customers from the first day.

The Bridge had been open a few weeks when a pretty blond woman walked through the door at noon

one day. She was young, in her early twenties at the most. But there was something old about her eyes.

“Hello.” Donna smiled at her.

“Hi.” The woman looked away, at the titles that hung over the nearest set of shelves. “I’m just looking.”

“Okay.” Donna settled back in her seat behind the counter. “Take your time.” *This one looks like she’s hurting, Lord.* Was she sick or suffering from a broken heart? Did she live alone in the area without family? Donna caught a glimpse of the woman’s wedding ring. She kept her questions to herself. Some people who walked through the door needed a little time to find their way.

Charlie walked up and put his arm around Donna. “We’re out of *Little Women.*” He kissed her on the cheek. “Four copies out the door in the last two days!”

The blond woman worked her way farther from the checkout counter, down another aisle, and out of sight. Donna held her finger to her lips. “She’s sad. Not sure why.”

“Who?” Charlie dropped his voice to barely a whisper. He peered down the closest aisle and pointed, his eyes questioning. “That way?”

“Yes. A young woman.” Compassion stirred Donna. “A little younger than us. Something’s wrong. I can tell.”

“Okay.” He nodded, his eyes bright. “I’ll pray.” In the purchase order book by the register, Charlie jotted down a note to buy more copies of *Little Women*. Then he returned to his inventory at the back of the store.

After a few minutes the young woman made her way back to the cash register. She folded her arms, and Donna could see that her hands were shaking. “I . . . need something to read.”

“Okay.” Donna faced her so only the counter separated them. “What were you thinking of?”

The woman shrugged one slim shoulder. “Something . . . happy.”

“Hmmm.” She hesitated. “Most stories get terribly sad before they find their way to happy.” She smiled, feeling the weight of the moment. “I’m Donna Barton. My story’s like that.”

For a few long seconds the woman looked at Donna, searching her eyes. “I’m Edna Carlton.” Tears came quickly and fell onto her cheeks. She brushed at them with her fingers. “Sorry. I’m . . . still in the sad part.”

Donna wanted to hug her or offer to pray for her. But she had a feeling that would come in time. “Want to talk about it?”

“No.” She shook her head, adamant. “I . . . I’m sorry. Not today.”

“That’s fine.” Donna nodded. “Someday . . . if you have time, I’ll tell you mine.”

Edna thought about that for a beat, and then the hint of a smile softened her expression. “I’d . . . like that.”

“For now, though, let’s find you a book.” Donna came out from behind the counter and led Edna toward the classics. “Maybe something exciting. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*?”

“Hmm.” Edna nodded slowly, lost in thought, the heartache strong in her eyes. “That might work.” By the time she left the store with her book her tone was lighter, her mood not so heavy. She looked a little more able to face the world on the other side of The Bridge’s front doors.

Whatever that world was for Edna Carlton.

When she was gone and after two newly regular customers filed into the store, Charlie found Donna again at the register. They were alone, the regulars out

of sight. Charlie took her hands and looked at her for a long time. A thin layer of wetness shone in his eyes. "I miss her."

She didn't have to ask who he meant. "Me, too." She angled her head, seeing easily into his heart. "I never even saw her face."

"But you know what?" He smiled.

"What?" She closed the distance between them so their bodies were touching, their faces inches apart.

He looked over his shoulder to the place where the customers were chatting, clearly engaged in whatever book they were discussing. "One of those ladies back there is thinking about going into business. Know why?"

"Why?" Donna loved this, being in his arms, sharing a passion for *The Bridge*.

"Because of a book she bought here." His brow lifted, and his eyes grew even brighter. "A book changed her life, Donna." He looked around at the shelves of books, the walls they'd painted and the light fixtures they'd installed. "Because of our little bookstore. Because of *The Bridge*."

Donna felt the satisfaction to the depths of her soul. "The lady who was here earlier . . . she's hurting. But she'll be back. I sent her off with Tom Sawyer."

His smile faded and the dampness returned to his eyes. He released her hands and framed her face. "It's working."

"It is."

A sad laugh played on his lips. "I wasn't sure how to take my next breath." He spread his hands toward the books and walls that surrounded them. "God is so great . . . He hasn't forgotten us." He leaned in and kissed her slowly. A desperate kiss that reminded both of them how great the pain was that they were moving past.

His words stayed with her while she sorted through the cash register receipts later that day. How far they had come in the last few months. God was bringing the people who needed a bookstore, people who needed a connecting point, a way to see life through a clearer lens. People like Edna Carlton. Yes, He was bringing them a few more every day. Lives were being changed through the power of books. She and Charlie were giving their lives to make that possible. And along the way God was both healing them and using them.

Indeed, their plan really was working.

All because of The Bridge.

CHAPTER SIX

E dna didn't rip into the book right away.

She let it sit on her kitchen counter like a stranger. When she would look at it between cups of coffee or moments of wandering through her apartment missing Tom, she had the feeling the book was looking back at her. Smiling at her.

Finally after her few dinner dishes were cleaned she picked it up and sat with it in the chair Tom liked best. She stared at the cover. Was it the title? The fact that Tom's name was a part of it? Something about the book called to her. Or maybe she felt this way because of the kind woman at the bookstore, the way she hadn't hesi-

tated before leading her to this book. A book whose title contained the name of the man she missed so much.

Almost like Donna Barton had known exactly what she might need.

Edna opened the front cover. She knew the story, of course. But she had never actually read the book. The first words tugged at her heart and tears gathered in her eyes.

Aunt Polly was looking for Tom, but he wouldn't answer. No matter how long or loud she called him he wouldn't respond.

The way Edna had felt since the doorbell rang.

She blinked twice so she could see as she worked her way down the first page, and somehow despite her broken heart by the end of the third paragraph she was no longer sitting in a desperately quiet apartment wondering how she might keep on living. Rather she was in Aunt Polly's farmhouse grinning at the mischievous ways of young Tom.

A little like her own Tom had been back when he was in grade school.

When she finished the first chapter she kept reading, too caught up in the story to stop. Not until well after midnight did she close the book and set it on her

bedside table. The next day at the mercantile she couldn't stop thinking about Tom and Huckleberry Finn and the trouble the two boys were getting into. The trouble they had survived, the plotting and planning of trouble yet ahead.

She could hardly wait to get home and pick up the book.

The story so captured her she forgot to eat until darkness fell outside, and when she finished the book in the wee hours of the morning she realized something she hadn't expected. Something other than Tom Carlton had consumed her for two full days.

The next afternoon when she was finished at the mercantile she hurried to The Bridge before the little shop closed. A sweet mix of rich coffee and worn leather filled the air and surrounded Edna. Donna was working at the counter again, and this time Edna walked up and gave the woman a hint of a curious smile. "How did you know?"

"Know what?" Donna's eyes were warm like before, warm and deeply concerned.

"*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. How did you know that's what I needed?"

"You said you were still at the sad part of your

story. Tom Sawyer takes people out of their story and into his.”

“The name. Tom.” She didn’t want to explain all of what happened, but she had to share this much. “That was my husband’s name. He . . . was killed in Vietnam.”

Sorrow welled up in Donna’s eyes and after several seconds she came out from behind the counter. “Edna . . . I’m sorry.” There was no hesitation now, no formalities between them. Donna hugged her and after a while she stepped back. “Whenever you want to talk about it, I’m here.”

“Thank you.” Edna sniffed. “I finished the book.”

“Already?” Donna waited.

“I loved it. I was there on the river with them, sneaking around at night and slipping into the back of the church during the service.” As she spoke, Edna’s heart didn’t feel as empty. “As long as I was reading the book, I . . .”

“You didn’t notice your own story.” Donna’s eyes said she understood on a personal level.

“Exactly.” Edna glanced at the shelves behind her. “I need another book.” She turned and looked again at the gentle store owner. “But I’d like to hear your story first.”

Donna's half smile was colored in a sadness that clearly still lived inside her. "Let's sit in the living room." The coffeepot was plugged in behind the front counter, quaint ceramic mugs stacked beside it. Donna poured them each a cup, gave one to Edna, and led the way to the worn leather sofa. They sat on opposite sides, facing each other. Donna took a slow breath, and for a long time she only waited, as if she were digging around in the basement of her heart for details she'd put behind her. A place where maybe she kept the story so she could get through the day.

Edna could certainly relate to that.

"It all started when I met Charlie Barton." This time her sweet smile touched her eyes. "I guess you could say God used Charlie to rescue me." She settled her shoulder into the sofa. "Before him my life was a nightmare." Her words came like a slow-motion flashback in a movie. She told of a childhood and adolescence marked by pain and loneliness, her parents' drug abuse and their early deaths.

No wonder she felt rescued when Charlie Barton came into her life.

Donna talked about Charlie's love of books and how his father wouldn't let him read. "Cement work

was the only option as far as his dad was concerned. The two haven't spoken in some time."

Edna nodded, understanding. "That *is* sad."

"Actually . . . no." Donna narrowed her eyes and stared out a distant window at the back of the store. "The sad part is coming."

Edna took a sip of her coffee and felt her stomach tighten. She waited, determined not to interrupt the story again.

Donna went on about how she and Charlie got married and started life on their own—without any family. "We found out we were expecting much sooner than we planned." She looked at her hands folded on her lap, as if she were gathering strength for this next part. "Even so, we were happy. We didn't have family supporting us, so we figured God was letting us start one of our own."

She told about how smoothly her pregnancy had gone. But everything changed when she went into labor. Quiet tears slid down Donna's cheeks as she recounted the frightening medical emergency, the loss of her baby girl, and the reality that she could never have children.

Edna didn't realize until the end of the story that she was crying, too. Because she wasn't alone in her pain, in

her sadness. People walking through the grocery store, and shopping at the mercantile, and even running a bookstore all had their own pain. Their own sad part of their story. She gave Donna's hand a squeeze, and let silence surround them for a minute. The two might be strangers, but they were not strangers to heartache.

They had that in common.

"So . . ." Edna kept her voice quiet, reverent, "you and Charlie moved to Franklin and opened The Bridge."

"Yes." Donna wiped the tears from her cheeks. She drank her coffee and seemed to wait while it worked through her. "God gave us this store. Here . . . we're finding our way back to happy." She put her hand on Edna's shoulder. "By putting books in the hands of people like you."

"Hmm. That's beautiful." She waited, not wanting to rush this time between them. "Thank you. For sharing."

"It helps." She sniffed, and the healing she'd experienced was evident in her eyes. "I'm here. When you want to talk about yours." She stood and nodded toward the rows of bookshelves. "Until then, let's get you another book."

Edna was glad Donna didn't push her. When she was ready to talk she had a feeling she would come here first. She and Donna walked a few aisles of fic-

tion titles, more, Donna said, to give Edna a tour of the store. But the most natural next choice was an obvious one—*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

And so began a string of good days that continued as long as Edna was reading. Huck Finn gave way to a breathless chase after the husky Buck in *The Call of the Wild*. She was caught with the schoolboys on the deserted tropical island in *Lord of the Flies*, and her heart ached on the Oklahoma plains as she finished *The Grapes of Wrath*. She fell in love with Don Quixote and Rhett Butler and Jay Gatsby, and she fought alongside Captain Ahab against the white whale in *Moby-Dick*. A whale that came to represent her fear and loss.

With each new book she would share a cup of coffee with Donna at The Bridge, and gradually bits of her story, anecdotes from her childhood, came to the surface. After a few months of reading, Edna was a different person. She got out of bed easily and caught herself humming when she made her morning coffee. Missing Tom was still a part of every breath, but her devastating heartache no longer consumed her. Books were changing her life. But she didn't consider the idea that they could do so much more.

That they might actually heal her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Edna could see something different in Donna's face as soon as she walked into The Bridge after work that day. It was summertime, and the city crowd from Nashville shopped Franklin's Main Street. More people meant more hours at the mercantile, so Edna made it into her favorite bookstore only once a week or so. This was one of those days.

Donna was waiting for her.

She smiled. "I picked out your next one." She pulled a book from beneath the register and set it on the counter. "It's time."

Edna and Donna were friends after so many

months, but this was the first time the shopkeeper had ever chosen a book for her ahead of time. “Okay.” Edna came closer and looked at the title. *Little Women*. She knew the story, of course, knew it was about a family of girls coming of age and she vaguely knew it was sad. That was the reason she’d avoided it. For all the books she’d allowed herself to get lost in, she’d avoided stories that dealt with great tragedy or loss.

After all, she was still in the middle of her own.

But looking at the cover, something about the book called to her. *Little Women*. She looked at Donna. Despite the time that had passed, she had never gone into detail about losing Tom. It was enough that her new friend had the facts. The rest of the story would come in time. When the thought of recounting it didn’t make Edna feel sick.

Donna held out the book. “It’s about loss. I won’t hide the fact.” Tucked in her expression was a wisdom greater than her twenty-something years, a wisdom that could only have come from experience. Edna hadn’t noticed that about the shopkeeper before. “Read it . . . please.”

Something in her tone left Edna no option. She began the book that night and immediately became

part of the March family. As she traveled the chapters, her deep connection to the characters had her laughing one minute and touched the next. She could see where the story was going. *Little Women* had been around as long as Edna could remember. Some of her friends had to read it in English class, but Edna's teacher had assigned an anthology of short stories instead.

Not only had she missed this brilliant and beautiful story, but she had missed the reason it was sad. By the time she realized the inevitable tragedy just ahead, Edna was a fifth sister and sweet Beth was her best friend. As Beth's frailty became more evident and her condition worsened, Edna read the book through streams of tears.

After three days of reading, Edna sat beside Beth and watched her tender musical heart gracefully begin to slip away. When Beth drew her last breath, Edna wept uncontrollably, the way she had given way to sobs after Tom's death. Questions railed against her soul. Why did people have to die? And why was it always the good ones, the kind ones like Beth and Tom? Why didn't God take the liars and crooks first? She mourned with the March family, and somehow she felt they were mourning with her, too. Not only mourning their Beth.

But mourning Edna's Tom. The whole March family.

At first she was angry at Donna for giving her the book. How could it ever be time to immerse herself in such a sad story? For a week she avoided *The Bridge*, avoided telling Donna how far back reading *Little Women* had set her. But the story stayed in her heart, calling to her, and a day after she finished it, she read it again. Faster this time. And one late night she came upon a line that took her breath away. Like a lightbulb turning on in Edna's soul, something happened inside her. She read the line over and over again.

Love is the only thing that we can carry with us when we go, and it makes the end so easy.

Suddenly Edna knew without any doubt that it had been like this for Tom. He had taken her love with him, and so when death called, he had been able to go. The God he loved had called him home, and he had gone easily. Because he could take Edna's love with him.

She closed the book and walked to her bedside table where she still kept Tom's T-shirt. It felt soft in her hands, and she pressed it to her face. She hadn't slept with it in a while. Whatever book she read at night had replaced her need for it. But now . . . now she breathed in the faint smell of him again. And deep inside her she felt the gaping wounds of losing him begin to heal.

Tom still loved her. He carried her love with him.

The next day she went to the department store and picked out a beautiful scrapbook. One with a textured canvas cover and a space in the middle for a single photo. Edna knew just the one that would work for the gift. Borrowing a camera from the owner of the mercantile, she took three pictures of The Bridge. She still didn't go inside. That could wait until she finished putting together the gift.

When she picked up the finished prints, she chose one that seemed to capture the bookstore better than the others. She placed it carefully in the framed window at the center of the scrapbook cover and smoothed her hand over it.

Perfect.

Next, she opened the cover, and on the inside flap she wrote:

Donna . . . Fill this book with the stories of old souls like me. People who sometimes need a place like this to bridge yesterday and tomorrow. People looking for a second chance. Thank you!

She wrapped the gift and the next day she took it to The Bridge.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Edna was a little concerned.

So much time had passed since she'd been to The Bridge that she wondered if Donna might be cool with her, distant. But as she stepped inside the bookstore, the shopkeeper's smile was the first thing she saw. Immediately, Donna came from behind the counter and hugged her. For a long time she looked in her eyes, as if she were checking Edna's heart for fresh scars. "You read it."

"I did." Edna handed her the wrapped scrapbook. "This is for you." She hesitated. "Before you open it . . . can we talk?"

Donna only smiled and poured them each a cup of coffee. “I was expecting this.”

How the young shopkeeper was so wise, Edna could only imagine. But as she took her cup of coffee and sat again with Donna on the sofa, her entire story spilled from her heart. They both cried when she got to the part about the doorbell ringing. When she finished, she looked at Donna for a long time. “You knew?”

“Yes. God told me you needed that book.”

Edna narrowed her eyes, puzzled. “God?” Not since Tom had she met someone who talked about the Lord like He was her friend. But He must have told Donna. The healing that had started in Edna’s heart made it impossible to question her friend’s certainty.

“Our faith and this store . . . that’s how we survived.” Donna gave Edna a lingering side hug. “We prayed we’d meet people like you. Hurting people who needed God and a good book. So they’d have a chance to survive.”

“People like me.” Edna understood now.

“Exactly.”

“After that day, October fifth, I didn’t think I’d survive. I thought—”

“Wait.” Donna stared at her. “October fifth?”

“Yes. The day I got the news about Tom.”

“Edna . . . that’s the same day . . . the day our little girl died.”

The truth of that took a long time to settle in, and for a good bit they were quiet, the air around them almost holy. Edna drank her coffee, marveling over the mystery and about Donna’s prayer and how God had answered it. She nodded to the package. “You can open it now.”

“You didn’t have to . . .”

“I wanted to do more.”

Donna gingerly ripped the paper from the gift, and for a long time she just stared at the cover. She ran her fingertips over the photo, and after a few seconds one tear and then another hit the canvas.

“It’s a scrapbook . . . I wrote you something inside.”

Donna opened the cover carefully, and Edna watched her read the inscription. Finally she lifted teary eyes to Edna, and again she leaned close and hugged her. “Thank you. We don’t have anything like this. A way to track the names and faces God brings through the door.”

Edna couldn’t help but think that in some ways the scrapbook would take the place of the baby books and yearbooks and family photo albums Donna and Charlie would never have. Donna seemed to be thinking the

same thing, because once more she looked at the cover, and then she thumbed her way through the empty pages, as if she could see the way they might be filled in the years and decades to come.

“It needs one thing. A picture of you beneath what you wrote.” Donna set her coffee cup down on an end table and hurried back toward the register. She pulled a camera from one of the adjacent cupboards. “Do you have your book? *Little Women*?”

Edna grinned. “In my purse.” She took it with her everywhere. Already she was on her third time through it.

“Let’s see.” Donna surveyed the area. “Stay there. This is perfect. The light from the back window is straight on you.” Her tone was lighter, more full of life. “Hold your book like you’re reading it.”

The woman’s enthusiasm was contagious. Edna found her copy of *Little Women*, crossed her legs, and held the novel open on her lap, opened to her favorite page, her favorite quote. It was the only one with the corner of the page bent over.

Love is the only thing that we can carry with us when we go, and it makes the end so easy.

She felt a sad smile fill her heart and move to her lips. The quote would stay with her always. As she

looked at it, she didn't hear Donna taking the picture until it was over.

"There. Years from now when I'm an old lady, that picture . . . that's how I'll always remember you, Edna."

"Donna, you won't need to remember me. I'll still be sitting in that chair reading whatever book you put in my hands."

Donna held up the camera. "I like that picture even better than the one I just took."

The next half hour passed quickly, and Edna had to get to work. When she stopped in a few days later, the scrapbook was on the counter for everyone to see. And the photograph Donna had taken was pasted in the scrapbook right where she said she was going to put it: beneath Edna's words.

Edna had a feeling that someday when she looked back, the scrapbook—and the picture of herself with her precious copy of *Little Women*—would mean as much to her as it would to Donna. Suddenly a realization hit her, one that filled her with indescribable joy.

She had just now been thinking about the future! Not tomorrow or next week. But years from now. Thinking about it without fear or worry or dread. And without wondering how she was going to survive

without Tom Carlton. Which could only mean one thing: Though she would never stop missing her husband, she was healing.

She was going to make it.

Because of the Bartons and *The Bridge* and a handful of books including one that her friend, Donna, had somehow known she needed. The one God wanted her to read.

Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*.

Donna waited until Edna was gone before she called Charlie to the front of the store. He loved the scrapbook as much as she did, but he hadn't seen the developed picture of Edna yet.

"Look at this." Donna motioned Charlie to her side. "Our first photograph in the scrapbook." She opened the front cover and showed him her work.

"Hmmm." Charlie leaned closer. "That's her, all right. The look in her eyes . . . like she's captured by the story."

"She was." Donna smiled at the picture of her new friend. "She didn't hear me click the camera."

“Fills my heart, Donna . . . This is what we wanted with The Bridge.”

“Yes.” She turned to him and put her hands on his shoulders. “You’re a brilliant businessman, Charlie. Your father was wrong.”

Gratitude shone in his eyes. “I love you.”

She leaned close and kissed him. “You were born for this.”

“We both were.”

For a few seconds they were quiet, and Donna wondered if, like her, he was thinking about their little girl. “Say something.”

“I don’t cry in the early morning anymore. Thinking about her.”

“Charlie . . .” She framed his face with her hand, his cheek rough against her fingers. “I thought I was the only one.”

“I saw her, Donna. I held her little body.” He clenched his jaw, clearly fighting a fresh kind of sadness. “I’ll always miss her.”

They swayed a little, drawing strength from each other, from a love deeper than most. Charlie looked down at the scrapbook. “You know what I think when I see that book . . . those empty pages?” He linked his

arms gently around her waist. “I think about all the faces we’re yet to meet, the people who will come through the doors. Folks who need a good book and someone who cares.”

“God will bring them. He brought Edna.”

“Yes, He did.” This time he kissed her, more slowly than before. “Thank you, Donna . . . for believing in me.”

“Always, Charlie . . .” She put her head on his chest and held onto him. The way she would as long as she lived. “Always.”

With that, Charlie whispered a prayer. He thanked God for His faithfulness, and he asked Him to keep the doors of The Bridge open for many, many decades. Charlie closed by asking that the Lord might bring people who needed something to get them from the pain of yesterday to the possibility of tomorrow. People who needed God and the two of them. And the miracle of a small-town bookstore.

So that some far-off day the scrapbook would no longer be empty.

It would be overflowing.

the
BRIDGE

A NOVEL

Karen Kingsbury

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CHAPTER ONE



She should have said something.

Even now, seven years later, with Thanksgiving dishes put away and another lonely December rushing up at her, Molly Allen knew the truth. Her year, her life, her Christmas . . . all of it might be different if only she'd said something.

The possibilities plagued her that Black Friday. They walked with her through the front door of her Portland, Oregon, private foundation office, hovered beside her over lunch at P.F. Changs, and distracted her every time she stopped in to see the cats and dogs at her animal rescue shelter.

This was Video Day. Molly's day after Thanksgiving.

Everyone else in the greater Portland area spent the day hunting bargains and stopping in at her shelter to

see if the gift they wanted might be in a cage instead of a Walmart. But now, as the day wound down, while shoppers unpacked their bags and counted their savings, Molly would snuggle beneath a blanket by herself and watch the video.

The way she did every year on this day.

She tucked a strand of long blond hair behind her ear and stooped down to the oversize cage on the bottom row. The room echoed with a dozen different barks and whimpers and cries for attention. A chorus of unrest and slight concern from the animals rescued this month to her shelter, one arm of the Allen Foundation's efforts.

"Okay, Buster." She unlatched the cage and welcomed a curly-haired gray terra-poo into her arms. "It's your lucky day. Yes, it is." She snapped a leash to Buster's collar. The dog was a two-year-old, stuck at the shelter for three weeks. Longer than usual, considering this was Christmastime, and the cute dogs usually went first. She scratched the dog just above his ear. "Let's get you to your family."

For good measure, she made a general announcement to the others. "It's still seven days till December, gang. Your turn will come!"

Buster wagged his tail furiously as Molly led him to the lobby. She liked Buster's new family. Of course, she liked most families. Anyone willing to rescue a pet was a friend of hers, no question. But this family with their twin seven-year-old boys seemed special. Their eyes lit up as Molly rounded the corner with Buster.

"Daddy, that's him! Our Buster dog!" One of the boys ran up and dropped to his knees, hugging Buster around his neck.

The other boy was quieter and hung back by their parents. His grin brightened the room all the same. The family had already signed the necessary paperwork, so this was the last step. Both parents shook her hand as they left. "What you're doing here, it's making a difference." The dad's eyes were warm. "I have a feeling you could be doing many more things with your time." He nodded at her. "Merry Christmas."

"Thank you." Molly hesitated. "Happy holidays."

The family turned their attention to Buster and the excitement of getting him out the door in the pouring rain and into their van parked just outside. As the family drove off, Molly checked the time. Six minutes till closing. She walked to the door and flipped the

sign. The cages were clean, and the animals all exercised by ten volunteer high school kids who had worked until an hour ago. She would check the water bowls and head home.

He called the video project “The Bridge.”

Somewhere in the opening credits, he wrote this descriptor: *How a small-town boy from Carthage, Mississippi, and a highbrow girl from Pacific Heights, California, found common ground on a daily commute down Franklin Road outside Music City to The Bridge—the best little bookstore in the world.*

Too wordy, too many locations, Molly had told him. The two of them would laugh about how he ever could’ve gotten an A on the assignment with such a horrific descriptor.

Molly set her drenched things down just inside the door of her walk-up apartment, turned on the lights, and took off her dripping raincoat. She lived well below her means, in a new two-bedroom unit on the famous NW Twenty-third Street. Trees along Twenty-third sparkled with twinkling lights even in July, and

the street boasted local coffee shops, cafés, and boutiques with only-in-Portland art and fashion. The pace and people took the edge off.

Her father would have hated it.

Dinner simmered in the Crock-Pot, vegetable potato soup with fresh-diced leeks and garlic and parsley. The soup he taught her to make. Her Black Friday soup. A whiny meow came from the laundry room, and her cat Sam strolled up, rubbing against her ankles. He was a funny cat. More dog than feline. “Hi, Sam.”

He flopped down on the kitchen floor and put his head between his paws.

“Exhausted, are you?” She bent down and scratched beneath his chin. “Good boy, Sam. Don’t overdo it.”

She ladled out a small bowlful of soup, grabbed her blanket and the remote control and settled into one half of her leather loveseat. The top button on the remote dimmed the lights, and the next would start the movie, which had been in the player since early that morning.

Molly caught her hair in her hands and pulled it to one side.

His name was Ryan Kelly.

Now he was married to the sweet Southern belle he'd dated back in high school, no doubt teaching music at Carthage High in Nowhere, Mississippi. But for two years while they attended Belmont University, Ryan had been hers. She'd dreamed of never going home again and playing violin for the philharmonic, and he'd talked about touring with a country band, making music on his guitar for a living. In the end, he had Kristen, his Southern girl back home, and Molly had her dad's empire to run in San Francisco.

But for those four sweet semesters at the Franklin bookstore, nothing came between them.

The ending was the hardest, the final touch, the turning away, her trembling hands. Every gut-wrenching heartbeat remained etched in her soul forever. Their good-bye had happened so fast, she still wasn't sure she understood why. How they could've parted ways so quickly and finally.

Molly hit the play button, and as the music began, the familiar ache built inside her. She didn't often allow herself this trip back to then. But the day after Thanksgiving belonged to him, to the way things once were, and to the unavoidable, inescapable truth.

Like Rhett Butler in *Gone with the Wind*, she should've said something.

He had set the camera up on the dashboard, rigged it with masking tape and a dowel so he could turn it slightly. The viewfinder flipped out, facing them. "Just act natural," he told her. "Keep your eyes on the road." His taped laughter rang through her living room the way it once rang through her mornings and afternoons.

The video started with the camera on him, and his first question always made her smile. "Okay, Miss Molly, tell the people how we met. The unlikely meeting that started the madness."

"The whole story?" He had turned the camera so she came into view, her face less than agreeable as she drove her BMW sedan. "While we're driving?"

He laughed again. "It's thirty minutes to The Bridge. I think you can multitask."

She made a face at him and then laughed as she glanced at the camera. "Fine. What's the question again?"

“Keep your eyes on the road.”

Their laughter came together in an up-tempo waltz, while the camera caught the discreet way their bodies seemed drawn to each other. The slight but intentional way their knees and elbows brushed together and the way she looked at him as he filmed her—as if she’d never been happier in all her life. Molly smiled as the video played. The camera had caught their heart connection, the friendship definitely, but it had also caught the connection they hadn’t been willing to talk about. The chemistry between them, so strong it took her breath even now.

Their crazy undeniable chemistry.

As the video played on, something remarkable happened, the reason Molly watched the video every year on this day. She no longer felt herself sitting in front of her TV screen watching footage shot seven years ago. Instead she was there again, the sun on her shoulders, adventure in her heart, the summer after her high school graduation. Not in a flashback sort of way. But really there. Heading into an oversize auditorium with three brand-new girlfriends for August orientation at Belmont.

Maybe it was the sense of freedom Molly felt that

day, the fact that she'd convinced her father to let her do the unthinkable—leave the West Coast to attend college in a flyover state like Tennessee. Or the fact that here she wasn't an heiress biding time until she could take over her father's corporation. She was a college kid, same as everyone else. Whatever it was, that day she felt wonderfully alive and hopeful, every predictable aspect of her life as far removed as the Pacific Ocean.

That day the Belmont auditorium was filled with the energy of college freshmen excited and anxious and desperately trying to fit in. Molly and the girls took the first open seats. Her eyes had barely adjusted to the light in the auditorium when one of her friends nudged the other. "Look at him!" She pointed to a guy one section over. He was tall and built, with short dark hair and piercing blue eyes. "He's looking at me!"

"Nice try." The friend laughed. "He's looking at Molly. Same as every other guy."

"Don't be ridiculous. He's just . . ." Molly giggled, but she couldn't finish her thought. Because in those few seconds, the connection between her and the dark-haired freshman was so strong it took her

breath. She'd met a number of kids by then—through registration and lunch and field games earlier that afternoon. This felt different, and Molly knew one thing without a doubt, no matter what else happened in her four years at Belmont.

She would never forget this single moment.

They didn't talk, didn't make their way toward each other when orientation finished that evening. Molly almost wondered if her dad had someone following her, someone who would pay the guy to stay out of her way. Because her time here had come with a stipulation from her parents. She could study music, but she couldn't date. If her father found out she was seeing a Belmont boy, he would bring her home on the next flight.

"You'll marry your own kind," he always told her. He'd say it with a smile, but he was serious all the same. And he didn't mean she'd marry just any guy in their circle of friends.

He meant Preston J. Millington III.

Preston had attended boarding school with her. The guy was smart and kind and personable enough. Their parents were best friends, and Preston was on the fast track for an MBA. Her father had already

promised him a position with his shipping corporation.

Molly had no feelings for Preston, but she'd been raised to believe she didn't have a choice. No say in the decisions that would shape her life. Not until she set foot on the Belmont campus did her life feel remotely like it was her own. Still, by the end of the first week of school, Molly wondered if she'd ever see the boy from orientation again.

That Friday one of Molly's friends invited her over for dinner, and she said yes, the way she said yes to every invite. She loved the freedom of coming and going whenever she wanted and spending time with people regardless of their income and influence. Her friend lived in downtown Franklin, thirty minutes south of Nashville. As Molly stepped out of her sedan, she saw a guy climb out of an old Dodge truck at the house next door. He had a guitar case slung over his back, and he stopped cold when he spotted her.

Again their eyes met, and Molly leaned on her open car door. It was him, she had no doubt. But what was he doing here? Before she could ask his name or why he was there, half an hour from campus, or what

classes he was taking, her friend bounded out the front door. “Molly! You’re here! Come in and meet everyone. My mom’s been cooking all day and—”

Molly pulled herself away from his deep stare and hugged her friend. They were halfway up the walk when she turned back and looked for him, but he must’ve gone inside. All through dinner, Molly thought about him, thinking up ways to ask her friend’s family who he was and whether he lived there or if he was visiting.

When she left that night, his truck was gone.

But on Monday, Molly arrived early to the music building for her instrumental theory class. As she entered the hallway, she was practically overcome by the beautiful sounds of an acoustic guitar and a guy singing a song she’d never heard. His voice melted her, and somehow even before she rounded the corner into the room, she knew. As if she’d known him all her life, she knew.

Seeing him on the other side of the classroom door only confirmed it.

He smiled and kept playing, kept singing, while she leaned against the wall and watched. When the song ended, he lowered his guitar and looked right through

her. "I was beginning to think you were a figment of my imagination."

She tried to think of a witty response, but her laughter came first. "You're a music student?"

"I am." He stood and shook her hand with his free one. This close, his eyes looked bluer than they had in the auditorium. "Ryan Kelly. They had me in the wrong class. Just got it all worked out."

"So you're in here?" Her heart soared.

"If I can catch up." He gave her a half grin and raised his brow. "I might have a few questions."

She felt her eyes start to dance. "I might have the answers."

And like that, it started.

Neither of them lived on campus. He couldn't afford the room and board, so he lived in Franklin with an older couple, family friends. She lived in a house her parents owned in Brentwood's McGavock Farms. Her dad had bought it well below market value. He hired a crew to renovate it before school started, with plans to keep it until she left Belmont, when he would sell it for a profit. For now the house was staffed with a housekeeper and groundsman, a married couple who lived upstairs. Molly had a suite

on the main floor, adjacent to the music room, where she could practice and study. Dorm living was out of the question.

“Communal living is not suitable,” her dad had told her. He tried to soften his expression. “You don’t know anything about that lifestyle. This way you’ll be safe.”

From the beginning, her feelings for Ryan were anything but safe. And since her parents’ staff would’ve reported her for having a boy over, Ryan’s idea was perfect from the beginning. “I know of this bookstore. New and used books in an old house in downtown Franklin. It has a reading room upstairs that no one uses. My home away from home.” He smiled at her, and the sparkle in his eyes touched the depths of her soul. “It’s called The Bridge.”

Molly was intrigued, and from that first study session, The Bridge became a private world for Ryan and her, a hiding place for the two of them. Sure, there were other patrons, but Belmont students didn’t drive that far, and Molly loved the anonymity.

The store was set up in an old house that once was a hiding place for Union soldiers during the Civil War. The floors were old weathered pine, and the

walls and doors had settled so that they didn't quite line up. The place smelled of old books and rich leather, and Molly loved everything about it.

The Bridge was run by a man named Charlie Barton, a friend to the people of Franklin. Charlie kept fresh-brewed coffee on a table near the front register where he hung out, quick with the right suggestion of a book or an insightful conversation. Once in a while his wife, Donna, joined him. The couple would sit with Molly and Ryan near the fireplace and listen. Really listen.

"Tell me about your classes," Charlie would say. Then he'd pull up a chair as if he had all day to hear details about music lectures and science tests and the English lit reports they were working on.

Donna would sometimes pull Molly aside. "That boy's in love with you," she'd say. "When are you both going to admit it?"

Molly would laugh. "We're just friends. Seriously."

"Hmm." Donna would raise her eyebrows. "I guess we'll see."

By the end of the first semester, Molly felt closer to Charlie and Donna than she felt to her own parents.

"I'm never going back," she told Ryan more than

one afternoon while they were at The Bridge. “They can’t make me.”

He would grin at her, his eyes shining in a way that stayed with her still. “No one can make us do anything.”

It took only a few study dates to learn all there was to know about each other. Molly told him things she hadn’t told anyone. How her life back home suffocated her and how she had never considered crossing her parents or disobeying them. She told him about Preston and her father’s corporation and the plans he had for her.

He was honest, too. “I have a girlfriend back in Carthage.” He watched her, looking for a reaction. “We’ve dated since our sophomore year of high school. Our families attend the same church.”

Molly felt the sting of the news, but she didn’t let him see. She couldn’t date him, anyway. He would be her friend, nothing more. Knowing about his girlfriend back home only made him safer, giving her permission to get as close to him as she wanted.

In the beginning, Ryan talked about his girlfriend fairly often. “Her dad’s a farmer,” he told Molly one day when they were studying at The Bridge. “He’s

giving her two acres, so later . . . you know, we can live there.”

Molly nodded, thoughtful. She didn't look away, didn't waver in her connection to him. “How will you be a professional guitar player in Carthage, Mississippi?”

His quiet chuckle was colored with discouragement. “I wouldn't be. Everyone thinks I'll come back and teach music at the high school.”

“What about you?” Her voice grew softer, the quiet of the store's living room encouraging the conversation. “What do you want?”

“It's a good Plan B, teaching music. I like Carthage.”

It hit her then how much they had in common, their lives already planned out. Suddenly she couldn't stand the thought. “No, Ryan!” She took hold of his shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. “You can't settle. You have to go for Plan A. Tour the world with the top country bands and play that beautiful guitar of yours.”

“Me?” He laughed again, but his eyes showed a hint of adventure that hadn't been there before. “What about you? None of this Preston and San Francisco for you, Molly Allen. You have to play violin for the

philharmonic.” His laughter faded, and he’d never looked more serious. “No matter what they want for you.”

Like that, their dreams were set. They promised to push each other, to never settle for anything but the place where their hearts led. They took turns commuting to Belmont, and they shared a ride every day from the beginning. Ryan would pull his truck up at the corner of McGavock Farms and Murray, where she’d be waiting, out of sight of the staff. He’d take her to school and then to The Bridge when classes were done.

Homework wasn’t all they did at The Bridge. They also found books, classics that spoke deeply to them. *Gone with the Wind* and her favorite, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. From the beginning Molly related to the heroine and her determination to do the right thing, even at the cost of love. They read *Jane Eyre* aloud to each other, and once in a while, on the drive to The Bridge, they would quote lines to each other.

“I’m asking what Jane Eyre would do to secure my happiness,” Ryan would say in his best English accent, quoting Rochester.

“I would do anything for you, sir,” she would

quote Jane in her own Victorian accent, stifling the giggles that always came when they were together. “Anything that was right.”

When they weren't quoting Brontë's novel, they sang along with the radio and talked about their classes and dreamed of the future. For two wonderful years they never talked about the one thing that seemed so obvious at the time, the thing that could've made all the difference. They never talked about whether their friendship was a cover for the obvious.

That maybe they were in love with each other.

As the video wound down and Sam curled up on the floor beside her, as her tears slid down her cheeks the way they did every time she watched the film, Molly couldn't help but think the one thing she would always think this time of year.

She should've said something.