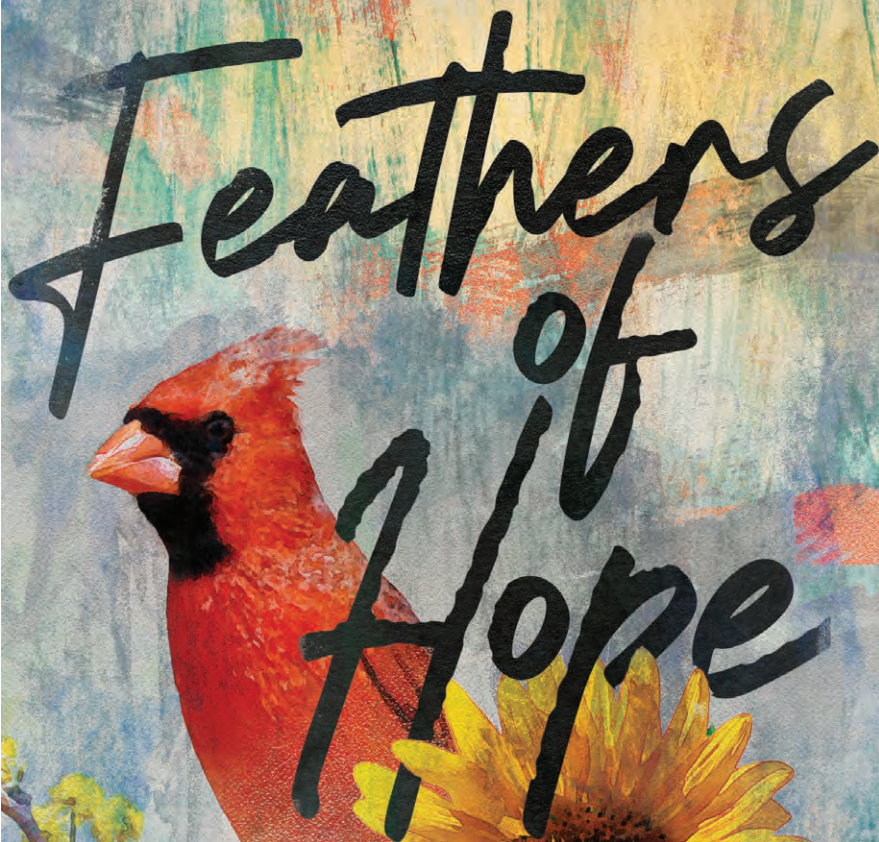


SHARON GARLOUGH BROWN

# Feathers of Hope



*A Novel*



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When the cardinal landed at their bird feeder early that morning, its eyes bulging, its head stripped of red crest feathers, leaving it black and bald, Wren Crawford was sure the poor creature was either sick or wounded. She set her second cup of coffee on the kitchen table and watched him through the glass slider. If he didn't drop dead on the patio now, she would likely find him in the yard later. She hoped she would find him before the neighbor's cat did.

She checked the cupboard beneath the sink for spare gloves. She would get a garden trowel, too, in case she needed to carry him to the woods for a burial.

Just as she was picturing the scene, her great-aunt, Katherine Rhodes, sidled up beside her, wrapped in her terrycloth robe and holding a striped journal. She followed Wren's gaze to the yard. "Molting season," Kit said. "That guy lost all his feathers at once."

Wren felt her shoulders relax. "So, he's not sick?"

"No, he's fine. Just not too handsome right now." Kit's gentle smile indicated she not only perceived where Wren's racing thoughts had landed but understood how they'd arrived there. "Most birds molt gradually," she said, "but every once in a while, you see one that's experienced a more sudden, dramatic shedding of the old."

After living under Kit's roof for nine months, Wren had grown accustomed to her speaking in metaphor. But instead of offering any further insights, Kit patted her arm and said, "He'd make an interesting painting, don't you think?"

Yes. Someday. When she had energy for creative work again. She grabbed her phone off the kitchen table and snapped a photo before the bird flew away.

Vincent would have painted him, she thought later that morning as she loaded her housekeeping cart with supplies from the nursing home storage room. The man who had painted peasant workers and starry nights, sunflowers and kingfishers, would have painted that molting bird with such tenderness, it would have made her weep.

Because he knew how molting felt.

She pushed her cart down the first of three resident hallways she was responsible for cleaning, noting the shadow boxes along the way. Fastened on the wall outside each door were miniature museums filled with curated items to remind staff and visitors of the lives the residents had enjoyed before the loss of occupations, hobbies, health, or loved ones.

As she dusted Mr. Kennedy's box, with its slightly stained Titleist golf ball, a packet of heirloom tomato seeds, and a photo of him as a robust young man in a military uniform, she prayed for him. Molting was a good metaphor, not just for herself but also for the people she served. And not just for the residents but also for the people who loved them. The spouses. The children. The grandchildren. The friends. They were all shedding in different ways. Some more dramatically than others.

"Good morning, Mr. Kennedy," Wren said as she placed her hands beneath the sanitizer dispenser on the wall.

He was seated in a faded armchair beside the bed, his thin hair not yet combed, a white towel tucked like a bib into his gray-checked pajama top. At the sound of her voice, he glanced up from his breakfast tray, where he was trying unsuccessfully to spear a sausage with his fork. The tremor was bad this morning.

Leaning her head back, she scanned the hallway. No nurses or aides in sight. "How about if I help you with that?" She walked over to the tray table and guided the fork to his mouth. He took the bite and chewed slowly. "Is it good?"

He swallowed, then opened his mouth like a little bird. Gently, she loosened his grip on the fork, loaded it with another bite, and held it to his lips. He took it, chewed, and swallowed. Then he sputtered with a cough.

“Are you okay?”

He coughed again.

She reached for the plastic two-handled sippy cup on his tray. “This looks like apple juice. Is that all right? Or would you like me to get you some water?”

With a thin, weary rasp, he replied, “Juice is okay.”

She guided his fingers to each handle. “Got it?”

“Yep.” His tremor caused the juice to splatter onto his face as he maneuvered the spout to his lips. She waited for him to finish drinking, then helped him set the cup on the tray. Just as she was about to dab his chin and cheeks with a napkin, one of the nurses entered, carrying a small container of applesauce, a glass of water, and a plastic cup with pills. Greta eyed Wren but said nothing. “I’ve got your morning medications, Pete.”

Wren slipped out of her way.

“Whoops,” Greta said, “looks like you had a shower.” She wiped him off with a corner of his towel bib.

As Wren disinfected her hands again, she surveyed the small memento collection in the room: a golfing statue engraved with his name, a picture of Mr. Kennedy beaming beside his wife on a sailboat, and a few framed photos of his son and grandchildren, who lived in California. Mr. Kennedy said they came to visit sometimes, but he also said his wife came to visit sometimes, and she had died seven years ago.

Greta spooned out a bit of applesauce and placed a pill on top. “Okay, first one, Pete. Open the chute. A little wider. Got it? Good.” She watched him swallow. “You need water to wash it down?” When he did not reply, she put a hand to her hip. “Is that a ‘no, thank you’ or a ‘yes, please?’”

He swallowed again and said, “No, thank you.”

She loaded up another pill. “Okay, next one coming. You know the drill. Good job. One more, okay? Almost done.”

When Mr. Kennedy spluttered and coughed, Greta handed him a cup. “You’re scheduled for a bath today. We’ll get you smelling nice and fresh.”

He murmured something Wren couldn’t hear.

“You need help getting to the bathroom?” Greta asked.

“I’m okay,” he said.

“Don’t wait until I leave and then ring your call button. I’m here now. You sure you don’t need to go?”

“I’m sure.”

“Okay. Chelsea will be here soon to help bathe you and get you dressed.” She turned toward Wren. “You might want to wait to clean until they’re finished.”

“All right,” Wren said. After Greta left, she approached his chair. “Do you want me to turn on the Golf Channel for you, Mr. Kennedy? It’s Thursday. I bet there’s a tournament somewhere.”

He nodded. Wren picked up the remote control from his tray and turned on the television, which was already set to the right channel.

“You want to watch with me?” he asked, his voice not much louder than a whisper.

“I’d love to, but I’ve got more cleaning to do. Would it be okay if I join you after I’m done?”

He cleared his throat and paused, as if uncertain whether he could project loudly enough to be heard again. “Sure thing.”

Wren smiled at him. Sometimes speaking even two syllables was heroic. “I’ll be back after your bath to clean, okay?”

“Okay.”

She set the remote control down again, close enough for him to reach it. “Is there anything else you need right now?”

He stared at her. “My wallet.”

Wren tucked a strand of her dark hair behind her ear. She’d had this conversation with him many times. “Your wallet’s in a safe place. You don’t need it today.”

“You need a tip for cleaning my room.”

She patted his shoulder. “It’s okay, Mr. Kennedy. Everything’s already been taken care of.”

“I already paid you?”

“Yes.” That was the simplest answer. “Would you like to keep working on your breakfast?”

“Sure.” In the three months she had known him, she had never once heard him complain about his sausages or eggs getting cold.

“Okay, I’ll see you later.” From the doorway, she silently cheered him on as he tried to load his fork. He had probably once been as fiercely determined to sink a long putt. She straightened a few bottles on her cart and waited until he had successfully conveyed his food to his mouth before she proceeded to her next room, celebrating one inconspicuous, monumental victory.



“Wren, can you come help me with this?”

She looked up from the carpet, where she was kneeling to pick up staples that had fallen off a bulletin board the activities director was redesigning. Having removed the Uncle Sam, Liberty Bell, and fireworks pictures, Peyton, who was a few years younger than Wren and working her first job out of college, was now decorating for a tropical beach party.

Wren joined her at a table covered with cutouts of pineapples, palm trees, and surfboards.

“Hold these, will you?” Peyton handed her two streamer rolls, then started unrolling and twisting the red and yellow strands together. “I hope we get a good turnout this time,” she said. “I scheduled it for a Sunday afternoon, thinking we might get more grandkids that way.”

Wren nodded. Only a few kids had shown up for the Fourth of July barbecue. But more families might be in town mid-August. “Have you done this theme before?”

“Yeah, right after I started working here last summer. But most of these guys won’t remember. And we’ve got lots of new people.”

Wren flinched. Given how casually she'd said it, Peyton probably wasn't thinking about the reasons for the high turnover. Becoming immune to death or decline seemed to be an occupational hazard at Willow Springs.

Peyton finished winding the streamers, taped off her end, and motioned for Wren to tear off her side. "Thanks," she said as Wren handed it to her. "Want to help with the bulletin board, or are you still cleaning rooms?"

Wren set the rest of the crepe paper on the table. "I'm done with rooms. I've just got to vacuum the hallways." Since it didn't make sense to vacuum before Peyton finished decorating, she reached for the stack of pudgy letters. "What do you want it to say?"

"I sketched the whole thing there." She gestured to a sheet of paper.

While Wren pinned letters for "Aloha Friends" and "So Happy to Sea You," Peyton described her plans for themed decor, food, and crafts. Kayla, one of the certified nursing assistants, had grown up in Hawaii and was willing to demonstrate a hula dance. "People will love that," Peyton said. "She can teach all of us some simple moves." Wren wondered how Mr. Kennedy would feel, battling to control his arms and hands.

The elevator doors swished open, and she looked over her shoulder. Mrs. Whitlock's daughter Teri, who rarely missed a day of visiting, removed a visitor badge from the basket, then rolled her shoulders and took a deep breath before she realized she'd been observed. When Wren waved to her, she put on a smile and glanced at the bulletin board. "You girls always make it look so festive in here."

Peyton swished her long blonde ponytail and made a mock curtsy. "Thanks. I try."

Wren faced the board again.

"So sorry to interrupt," Kayla said as she strode into the lounge, "but there's a bit of a mess to clean up in Miss Daisy's bathroom."

"I'll be right there," Wren said, and retrieved her cart from the hall.