



All You Need is Love ... and Lilacs

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Dedication

For all those who have lost someone or something dear.
May you remember that there is always someone
or something to be found.

Chapter One

Claire

Claire washed the dishes. She dried the dishes. Then she put them all away. Shutting the last cupboard door, she leaned against the counter, drumming her fingers along the edge. What to do? What to do? She gazed around her immaculate kitchen. Everything in its place. Everything spic and span. Maybe too clean? A little too organized? She didn't know what to do next.

She glanced at the clock. It was only 6 a.m. She'd been up for two hours, unable to sleep. Well, she did sleep for a few hours, but then the adrenaline began kicking in just before sunrise and she couldn't stay in bed any longer. The big, wide, empty bed. Too big. Too wide. Too empty.

She sighed. Caleb would just be getting up now. If he were here. But he wasn't here. And he wasn't going to be here again. It had been six weeks since she had held his hand, kissed his damp forehead and said good-bye in the pale blue hospice room overlooking the apple orchard. Six weeks since that final, painful farewell. *At least he isn't suffering anymore*, people said. *He's in a better place. You can take comfort that you did all you could for him.* Well, they could say anything they wanted; she felt no comfort or peace at all. Not without Caleb by her side. Not without Caleb to laugh with. To take walks with. To watch *Blue Bloods* with. To cook for. To share her day with. Sure, she was glad he wasn't suffering; seeing him suffer those last few weeks had been even harder than saying good-bye to him. As for the "better place" he was supposedly in, how could there be a better place than with her? Right here in their own house?

She opened the silverware drawer and absent-mindedly picked up a teaspoon, then slapped it against her palm. She liked how it felt against her skin- cool, smooth, insistent. Suddenly she remembered. There was *one* thing someone had said that did bring her comfort on the day of Caleb's funeral. Now, who was it? After the funeral, someone had said, *He loved you so much, Claire. Caleb loved you so much.*

Claire frowned and dropped the spoon back in the drawer, easing it shut with her hip. Was it Jarmon, her boss at the library? No, probably not. Jarmon didn't really know Caleb. Maybe it was her best friend Hallie. That was something that Hallie would say. And she would have said the same thing if Hallie's husband Wyatt had died from colon cancer at the surprising age of 56. But Wyatt wasn't dying. And Claire couldn't help but resent Hallie for that. In fact, she hadn't called Hallie in over a week. She just couldn't bear to talk about it anymore, any of it, with her best friend whose husband was alive and well and probably making love with her right now.

She wiped a tear from her eye and wandered onto the back deck which overlooked a large fenced-in yard and her well-loved flower garden. Leaning against the railing, her eyes wandered over the yard as she inhaled the sharp scent of the lilac bushes that she had insisted on planting as soon as they'd moved into the house three years ago. Caleb and Wyatt hadn't even finished moving in the last of the boxes from the U-Haul truck when Claire had gotten into her car.

“Where are you going, hon?” Caleb had asked in exasperation, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

“I’m going to that garden center across town to get the lilac bushes,” she had said, a little bit of her own exasperation tinging her voice. “Remember? I told you I was going to do this.” “Yeah, sure,” Caleb had said, stretching his neck and shoulders. “Lilacs. Right. But I didn’t think you were going to do that *today*. Don’t you want to unpack first?”

She had continued to back out of the driveway. “No way. Lilacs first.” Caleb had shaken his head as he watched her drive away. But he was smiling. She remembered that he had been smiling.

Claire smiled faintly, remembering that day, the day they had moved into this beautiful little house on a side street about a mile from the lake in Penbrook, Connecticut. She slowly walked down the steps from the deck onto the lawn which was overgrown, of course, because Caleb was not here to cut it and it hadn’t exactly been high on her list of priorities lately. She was barefoot, and the cool damp felt important to her tired feet. This sensation in her feet spread a hint of wakefulness through her body which had been feeling heavy and swollen with grief. She stepped carefully to where three magnificent lilac bushes formed a pinkish purple corner of the yard and plunked herself down in the wet grass in front of them. Somehow, the scent of lilacs always made her happy. Caleb hadn’t seemed to care one way or another about the lilacs, or about any of the flowers she had planted back here or in front of the house. He wasn’t colorblind, but he just didn’t see things the way she did, and his sense of smell had been frightfully poor. She had always felt sorry for him because his senses seemed so toned down compared to hers. Except for his hearing. He had always had sensitive ears and when Ginger, their golden retriever, had been with them, she’d teased him about how Ginger must have gotten her auditory genes from him. Well, he had been a musician, so there was that.

When Claire and Caleb had met, he was in a four-man musical group that played at weddings and other kinds of happy gatherings. They played oldies and current hits too, and Claire was drawn to his beautiful voice. He’d had the smoothest speaking voice too. Until the end when his words were forced to be raspy and difficult to decipher.

She sat there now, surrounded by her beloved lilacs and remembered their wedding day, thirty years ago. It had been a standard marriage service in her parents’ church down in New Jersey, but at the reception, before their first dance as husband and wife, Caleb had taken the microphone and proceeded to sing to her. *I’ll Be Loving You Always*. She smiled, remembering, not just their wedding day, but all the other times that he had sung to her throughout their marriage. The tears flowed more fully and she wiped her reddened eyes on the edge of her Tshirt. Caleb was never going to sing to her again.

Sitting in the corner of the yard now, she pulled her knees to her chest for a moment, hugging herself close. Her jeans were soaked from the early morning dew, and her shoulder-length graying blonde hair tumbled over her legs as she rested her head on her knees. She could feel her

loss like a sharp ache in her stomach. A persistent ache was in her whole body and she had no way to let it out, to set it free. Tears took the edge off, but they could only do so much.

Claire lifted her head as she heard her cell phone ringing through the open windows of the kitchen. Her mind felt foggy. Maybe Caleb had gone to work early and was calling to- No. That couldn't be right. He wasn't ever going to call her again. No more abrupt voice messages on her phone. No more to-the-point texts. No more. No more anything.

Suddenly she remembered. On Sunday evening, Pastor Jamison Carter had called her to say that he was going to check in on her today. So that was probably him on the phone. He'd been the minister at their church for only a year now, but he was the best one she'd ever come across. He was in his late thirties and single, which had raised a lot of eyebrows from the old-timers at first, but they were used to him now and he was beloved by all. Well, beloved by most. Crotchety old Mr. Henderson, along with deacons Jack and Helen Dempsey were still not convinced, but Jamie, as everyone (well, *almost* everyone) called him, took it all in stride and with good humor.

Slowly Claire stood and moved away from the lilacs, not noticing the cool grass that sensuously tickled her bare feet. Sometimes she thought it was better to enjoy the numbness than to let herself feel. A person could only handle so much feeling.

She was making her way back to the deck and had her hand on the railing to climb the steps, intending to call Jamie back and tell him that today wasn't a good day to visit (would there ever be a good day to visit?), when she saw something out of the corner of her eye, on the side of the house, next to their car. Well, it was *her* car now, she guessed, not *their* car any longer.

She turned and headed toward the car to investigate, but stopped when she saw a little boy crouched on the pavement next to the bright green hose which hung from the metal hook like a sleeping jungle snake. The boy jumped up as soon as he saw her coming around the corner. He couldn't have been more than six or seven years old. "Miss! Miss!" he called, and his voice sounded like bells and whispers and the summer sky with birds flying through. She was surprised to even harbor such a thought.

"Well, hello there," she managed to say, noticing that her own voice was hoarse from crying. Also from not speaking to anyone for so many days. "What are you doing here?"

"I smelled the lilacs, Miss, and I was coming to get one for my mama, because lilacs are her favorite flower and I didn't think you'd mind, but then I saw you sitting there and you were crying so I came back here because I thought you wouldn't want to see me while you were, you know, crying." He paused and took a breath, watching her warily, still crouched by the garden hose. His eyes were large and blue, his hair was sandy brown, and he was wearing a bright red Tshirt and gray shorts. His feet were also bare.

This confession startled her and she put her hand to her mouth and then her eyes. She hadn't thought that anyone would ever see her back here, in her previously private yard, weeping among the lilacs. "I'm sorry that you saw me crying like that," she said carefully, moving a little closer to him.

He stood up quickly and grinned. “That’s okay. My mama cries like that sometimes too, but we don’t have lilacs in our yard. If we had lilacs I think Mama would go out there to cry too. So it’s okay.”

Several thoughts raced through Claire’s mind at once. First, who was this little blue-eyed boy with the bright smile that seemed to cross the distance between them and lighten her heart? And why did his mother cry? Where did they live? Why hadn’t she seen him before? Her brain was becoming agitated with all these thoughts fluttering about, yet how blessedly good it felt to not be thinking about Caleb in that hospice room for a change.

The boy turned to leave, saying, “I’m sorry you were crying and I don’t wanna bother you so I’m gonna go.” His voice was quieter now, like silk stitches on soft cotton fabric.

“No, wait!” she called. He turned and looked at her curiously, expectantly. “You’re not bothering me at all. I’m Claire. Claire Reynolds. What’s your name?”

“I’m Tommy Fields. I live two houses down with my mom and little sister Abigail. We call her Abby. She’s four. I’m seven but almost eight. I’m in second grade now but soon I’ll be in third. Abby’s not in school yet. She’s too little to go to school so Mama stays with her while I go and learn stuff.”

“I haven’t seen you around before, Tommy.”

“Oh. Well, that’s ‘cause we just moved here. Actually we didn’t *just* move here. We’ve been here for... um...” He paused for a moment, looking up to the sky and counting on his fingers.

“Well, I’d say we’ve been here for six weeks now. We got here at the end of March and now it’s May, right?” He nodded with satisfaction. “That’s right. How long have *you* lived here?”

“About three years.”

“Wow, that’s a long time, isn’t it?” He didn’t pause for her to answer, but ran closer to her so he was standing right in front of her, looking up, blue eyes seeming to mirror the perfect May sky.

“I have to go home soon ‘cause I have to get ready for school but Mama’s probably not up yet but that’s okay because I can get myself ready. I know how, and the bus comes right down there at the corner. Do you go to school too?”

Claire smiled in spite of herself. There was something endearing about this child. “No, but I do work at the library downtown. Have you been there?” She squatted down so they were at eye level.

“Nope. But I do like to read, you know.” He fidgeted with the bottom of his shirt for a moment.

“Reading is a good thing to like,” she replied. “Maybe you can come by the library someday and I can help you find some books.”

She didn’t think his smile could get any bigger, but it could, and it did. “Okay! I will see if Mama can take me. Maybe today or tonight after school.” He paused to frown. “If I don’t have a

lot of homework I mean. And if she isn't... you know..." He looked away and the brightness in his eyes dimmed a little.

Claire frowned. She wanted to ask about his mother, but didn't think she was ready for the answer. What kind of mother isn't up in the morning to send her little boy off to school? She deliberately steered clear of that topic. "Do you get a lot of homework in second grade?" Claire stood up, her knees creaking as she did so. It had been several months since she'd frequented a yoga class and her body was complaining about that now.

Tommy shrugged. "Sometimes. You never know."

"I guess that's right. You never know."

He turned to go again but she reached out and gently touched his shoulder. "Hey. Tommy. Before you go, I'll give you a lilac branch to take to your mom. Would you like that?"

Tommy jumped up and down. "Yes, I'd *like* that. A whole *lot!*" He was practically shouting now and his body was vibrating with excitement. It sounded like a whole trumpet section was brightening the spring morning. He followed her to the kitchen where she grabbed a pair of shears from the counter, then to the lilac bushes, bounding ahead of her and dancing around joyfully while she snipped a branch and handed it to him. "Thank you, Miss. I mean, thank you *Miss Claire.*"

"You're very welcome and I hope your mom likes it."

"Oh, she will, she will, she will!" he called over his shoulder, racing out of the yard and down the driveway.

Claire stood there for a few minutes, savoring the stillness of the air, the warm morning sun, the birds singing in the trees overhead. She was also savoring the connection that she'd just made with Tommy. It had been a long time since her own son was that young. Adrian was 31 now and happily settled down in Bayview with Jonathan, his best friend of thirteen years whom he'd married five years ago. When he was seven, Adrian had not been as exuberant or chatty as Tommy. He had been more serious and intense, prone to enjoy solitude more than playing in groups. Caleb had wanted Adrian to play sports, to go hiking and camping with him, but Adrian was not that kind of child and Claire had had to temper many an argument between her husband and son. Caleb had loved Adrian immensely, though. She knew that. And best of all, Adrian had known that all along. Caleb knew how to love, that was for sure. He hadn't been good at the details of loving- big romantic gestures, little surprise gifts, sweet texts or creative voicemails. But he had been good about the big picture of loving. She had always known without a shadow of a doubt that he had truly, deeply loved her.

Claire smiled as she finally remembered the only comforting words spoken to her at the funeral: *Caleb loved you so much, Claire.* Pastor Jamie. He had been the last one to talk to her that day, after everyone had left. He'd held both of her hands and studied her worn, tear-streaked face with compassion in his warm gray eyes. After speaking, he had gathered her into a loose hug

while she cried some more. “Call me if you need anything, anything at all,” he had said and she could tell that he’d meant it. So far she had not called him because what she *needed* was Caleb alive again and she was pretty sure that, even though Jamie had a direct line to God because of his profession, he wasn’t able to give her *that*.

Pastor Jamie. Darn it! That had probably been Jamie on the phone, reminding her that he was coming to visit today. She moved quickly to the deck and back into the kitchen, reaching for her phone. She would tell him not to come. Today wasn’t a good day for a visit. There weren’t any good days left. A flash of bright blue eyes passed through her thoughts. She hesitated, remembering how much she had enjoyed her interaction with Tommy. She smiled as she dialed Jamie’s number. “What time will you be here?” she asked when the familiar voice answered.

Chapter Two

Pastor Jamie

“I’m glad you called me back,” Jamie said a little while later. They were sitting on her front porch, she in her favorite green rocker and he on the cushioned love seat across from her.

Claire nodded. She was glad he wasn’t asking her *How are you?* Of all the ridiculous questions you could ask someone whose husband was gone . . . *gone* . . . that was it. How did people think she was supposed to answer *that?* “I’m glad too,” she replied quietly. “I was in the back yard when you called. My lilac bushes were comforting me. I know it probably sounds ridiculous, but sometimes I just go out there and sit in front of them and tell them things.”

Jamie leaned forward, elbows resting on knees. He gazed at her intently. “It’s not ridiculous at all. In fact, I tell my cat Petey things too. Not the same as lilacs, but pretty similar I’d guess.”

Claire brightened a little. “I didn’t know you had a cat. How old is he?”

“Well, first of all, he’s a she.” He noticed Claire’s raised eyebrows. “I know, I know. Everyone says the same thing. I got him as a kitten about ten years ago when I finished seminary and I wanted to name him Peter after St. Peter because he’s my favorite disciple. You’ve heard me preach about him, right?” Claire nodded. “Well, I was so excited to be choosing a kitten that I didn’t check its sex, or even consider it, until I took it to the vet for its first shots. I kept talking about Peter this and Peter that, and the vet finally gave me this strange look and said, “Jamison, this is a female.” Claire laughed. “I couldn’t take her back because I’d already fallen in love with her. And I couldn’t let myself give up the name Peter, so I decided to call her Petey instead. And I do tell her everything. She’s ten years old already. Best cat there ever was.”

“We had a dog a while back, when Adrian was young. Ginger. She was a golden retriever, very reddish in color. That’s why we named her Ginger.”

Jamie leaned back against the flowered cushions. “Petey is a ginger too. Orangish with pale stripes, almost like a tiger, and a white throat.” He chuckled and ran his fingers through his own red hair. “She’s good company. Very loving. A good listener.” “She doesn’t talk back, eh?”

Claire said.

“Not at all, which is why I love her so much. Well, one of the reasons anyway. It’s hard living alone sometimes. I’m a guy who loves solitude, but sometimes the house gets mighty quiet. Anyway, enough about me and my cat. What about you? What’s going on at the library?” Again, she was grateful that he wasn’t asking questions about her *grief process*, her *loss*, her *feelings*. Like everyone else. There was something about Jamie’s presence that calmed and reassured her. “Same ol’ thing, I guess,” she replied. “Oh, and Jarmon is starting a new summer children’s

program in July and August. I'll be assisting him and that is . . . something to look forward to maybe." She looked away and brushed away another tear. Would the tears ever stop coming?

"You're good with the kids, Claire. I've seen you in church when Sunday School lets out. And speaking of that, do you have any idea when you might be coming back? We miss you."

She sighed. There it was. The reason he was here, she supposed. Time to go back to church. Back to normal. But church was something (one of many things) that she and Caleb had always done together. She'd never been to a church service at Penbrook Congregational without him right there by her side. How could she go back there alone? She shook her head. "I don't know, Jamie. Maybe this summer. We'll see."

"I understand," he replied. "No worries. You come back when you're ready. We're all praying for you."

"I appreciate that. Would you like some iced tea?" she asked, deftly changing the subject. "Or coffee?"

"Sure, that would be great."

"Which?"

"Iced tea. No sugar."

"I'll be right back. I've got some of those ginger cookies that you like, too." They both laughed.

Jamie stretched his legs in front of him as he waited for Claire to come back from the kitchen. What a beautiful day, he was thinking, and what a sad time for Claire. He truly disliked these house calls where someone was sitting smack in the middle of a puddle of grief. Not even a puddle- an entire ocean of sorrow. It was challenging to know what to say, how to act. He was hyper aware that saying too much too soon would bring even more pain to an already hurting person. He'd been on plenty of parishioner visits like this, and he'd also spent many hours with Caleb in the hospice.

Most of the time on visits like this, Jamie thought that the best thing, the very best thing, was to simply sit still with the person in the silence. To wait for them to say what was on their mind if that is what they needed to do. Caleb had not been much for talking. He was one of the quiet ones. Even on days when he was sitting up and his eyes were open, seeing everything, he hadn't said much to Jamie. Or to Claire for that matter. He seemed to enjoy the silence, and so Jamie had let that be his gift.

There was power in silence, he thought, rubbing his smooth jaw and consciously taking a few breaths. There was something downright sweet and yet powerful about sitting with someone that close to death. Then he remembered Ella, whose life had ended so abruptly. There had been no time for silence. Dear Ella. He smiled sadly, cleared his throat, then stood up and began pacing, unable to contain his sadness in a seated position. Ella had been gone for twelve years now. She would have loved being a part of this church. She would have been so proud of him.

Jamie was startled out of his reverie by the sight of a petite woman with the straightest, longest black hair he had ever seen, striding up Claire's sidewalk. He jumped up as she approached. She was clutching a lilac branch against her chest as if it was a heavy suit of armor. Her blue eyes flashed as she brushed right past him. He might have been a ghost as far as she was concerned, he thought, staring at her as she practically flew to the front door and banged on it with the clenched fist that wasn't hanging onto the lilac branch. "Hey, slow down-" he began, making a move to calm the woman by gently touching her shoulder, but she made such an abrupt move with her upper body that he almost lost his balance.

At the same time, Claire appeared at the front door, carrying two tall, sweating glasses of iced tea, lemon wedges tucked neatly onto the rim of each. Her face looked as surprised as his at the sight of this diminutive woman banging on the door.

Jamie said, "Excuse me" to the woman, reached around her wiry, trembling body, and opened the door so Claire could come out. The woman backed up two precise steps, then stood, arms crossed over her chest, the lilac branch sandwiched between. He could smell the lilacs and they brought a slight smile to his face but the smile- and the memory- disappeared as the woman demanded in a loud, rough voice that didn't seem to match her body, "Are you Claire?"

"Yes. Yes, I'm Claire," she said, setting the glasses down on the low wicker table in front of the love seat. She turned back to the woman and wiped her hands on her jeans, then extended her right hand to greet the woman more formally, but the woman took another step backwards and her dark eyes seemed as if they could shoot something sharper than poisoned arrows.

"This lilac branch is from your garden." she declared in a too-loud voice, and Jamie almost covered his ears.

"It certainly is." Claire paused and frowned, wrinkling her forehead. Then she smiled. "Oh, you must be Tommy's mother. What a sweet little-"

The woman threw the lilac branch on the floor, stomped on it once, then swiftly turned to walk away.

Claire and Jamie stared at her in bewilderment. "I don't understand," Claire said, following the woman down the steps and onto the sidewalk. "Tommy said that lilacs were your favorite flower and-" The woman whirled around to face Claire, her hands on her hips, lower jaw jutting forward. "It's none of your damn business what my favorite flower is. And you had no business talking to my son," she blurted, pointing a scolding finger toward Claire's face.

"But he was here in my garden this morning and I thought-"

"Tommy is not supposed to leave the house before he goes to the bus," she replied, and there was fire in her words. Claire thought she had an accent, her voice was lilting in a way that didn't fit with her anger.

"I'm so sorry. If I had known that, I would have walked him home myself. Are you sure you don't want-?"

The woman interrupted, her brown eyes flashing. “I don’t want your precious lilacs and I don’t need anyone’s help!” She spit the words out with disdain, then shook her finger at Claire. “Tommy and Abby and I are just fine. If I find out you talked to him again, there’s going to be hell to pay.” She turned and practically ran down the sidewalk.

Stunned, Claire and Jamie watched her leave. Their eyes followed her down the street and into the front door of her small cottage. After hearing the door slam, they looked at each other in bewilderment. Claire slowly climbed the steps onto the porch and picked up the forlorn-looking lilac branch. “Wow,” she said, dropping into the rocking chair and laying the broken yet still beautiful branch in her lap, savoring the heady scent. “That was mighty strange.”

“I’ll say,” said Jamie, picking up his glass of iced tea and taking a large swallow. “I take it you met Tommy this morning and he was nothing like his mother?”

She shook her head. “Not by a long shot. I’d been sitting with my lilac bushes and I was crying, of course.” She sighed, shaking her head. “Evidently, Tommy came over to swipe some lilacs for his mom because he said they’re her favorite flower. But he saw me crying, and hid in the driveway instead. When I found him there, we actually had a lovely conversation. He told me he didn’t want to bother me because his mother cries sometimes like I was crying and she didn’t like to be bothered when that was happening.” She squeezed the lemon wedge into her tea and took a sip. “He told me that his mom sleeps a lot, so I felt sorry for him and gave him the lilac branch to take to his mom. I thought I was doing a good thing. Who knew?” She petted the lilacs like they were a cat, contentedly asleep on her lap.

Jamie finished his tea with one more swallow. “So you haven’t met them before?”

“No. They moved here about six weeks ago, and you know where I was six weeks ago. I wasn’t really paying much attention to the neighborhood.”

“Of course, of course.”

Claire tucked a few strands of hair behind one ear. “When he found out I worked at the library, he got all excited but he’s not been there yet. I invited him to come by so I could help him pick out some books. I remember what Adrian liked around that age. He said his mom might bring him, but now I can see that that’s probably not going to happen.”

She stared out over the scarlet azalea bushes that bordered her porch, and a memory seeped into her mind. Caleb and Adrian. When Adrian was seven, he had loved books too- in fact, he still did- and he was always clamoring to go to the library or the bookstore. Claire had dearly wanted to be the one to take him, and once in a while she did, but she’d encouraged Caleb to make that their weekly time together. Father-Son Time, they had called it. She smiled fondly, remembering.

Jamie noticed her long-distance gaze and gave her some silence. After a while, her eyes wandered back to him, and she set down her glass. “I’m so sorry, Jamie, I didn’t mean to leave you just now.”

Jamie nodded. "It's perfectly all right, Claire. I don't always need to be talking. It's a nice morning to sit on the porch and hang out together, or *chill*, as the kids like to say." He smiled gently.

Claire sighed. "I was just thinking of Adrian when he was seven. It's such a sweet age. Caleb and he had such good times together at the library and the book store. Caleb wanted to take Adrian fishing, or to a ball game, and once in a while Adrian would go with him just to make his dad happy, but mostly they went and picked out books to read. Adrian was so happy to spend time with Caleb like that and Caleb was . . ." She wiped her eyes. "He had such a good heart."

"Yes, he did." Jamie paused, considering. "I wonder what Caleb would think about you giving Tommy those lilacs for his mother."

"Oh, no doubt about that. He'd have gone out and bought them a whole bush!" She smiled through her tears. "And he wouldn't take any baloney from Tommy's mother either. Right this minute, he'd probably be marching up to her front door, asking if he could hang a picture frame, or fix a leaky faucet."

"That would be just like Caleb," Jamie agreed, then gave her another gift of silence.

After a while, Claire stopped rocking and moved to the edge of her seat. "Jamie, thank you for coming today. At first I didn't want to see anyone, but then Tommy came, and I realized how isolated I've been. I'm so glad you were here when his mother came over. It might have been too much of a shock if I'd been alone." They both chuckled and she glanced at her watch. "Now I've got to head on over to the library. Jarmon has been very understanding about my calling in sick and showing up late, but I don't know how long before his patience runs out. I said I'd be there by ten o'clock."

"Sure thing," Jamie said, standing. He put his right arm gently around Claire and squeezed her shoulders lightly. "Remember what I said about taking care of yourself, hear? Grieving takes a huge toll on the body. Lots of water. Some vegetables and protein every day even if you don't feel like it."

Claire stepped back. She felt seen and cared for. "Yes sir," she said with a smile, giving a mock salute. "And maybe I'll come to church on Sunday."

"And maybe you won't," he said quietly before he turned to go. "But either way, it'll be okay. I'll stop by again soon."

"Thank you. We're so lucky to have you at our church." Claire waved and watched as he got into his practical white Ford Focus and drove away.

Chapter Three

Claire

By the middle of the afternoon, Claire was starting to feel fatigue creeping in, like the fog over Lake Penbrook in early morning. Except it was late afternoon and she still had two more hours to go. There were a few patrons weaving their way through the stacks, and another at the magazine rack, all intent on their own searches. She plopped down into the big office chair behind the checkout desk and closed her eyes for a minute. Maybe after closing up, she would stop by the grocery store, and get some marinated chicken thighs to put on the grill. Caleb always said that thighs were better on the grill than breasts. He also really liked the store's potato salad, and she'd long ago stopped making it herself because-

"Miss Claire?" Her eyes popped open at the sound of a young boy's voice, and she immediately saw that boy's bright blue eyes peering over the counter at her.

"Tommy!"

He grinned, then clapped his hands really loud.

"Shhh," she admonished, getting out of her seat and moving to the other side of the counter, crouching down beside him. "What are you doing here?" she asked softly.

He shrugged playfully, then tapped her on the shoulder. "You *invited* me, silly! Don't you remember?"

Claire stood and looked around. The same patrons were in their same places. She glanced toward the door warily, remembering the encounter with his mother earlier. "But how did you get here? Did your mother bring you?"

"Nah," he replied, hanging his head for a moment. Claire could swear she saw the light go out of his eyes. "She couldn't, not today." His head tilted back up and the light came back when his eyes met hers. "But I really, really, *really* wanted to come, so I walked. I knew where it was because the school bus went right by it on the way home! Penbrook Public Library. I saw the sign out front."

He seemed so proud of himself that Claire didn't want to argue with him. This seven-year-old boy had walked to the library all by himself. At a steady pace, it would have taken her almost an hour. How long had it taken him? She shook her head in wonder. "That's a long walk, Tommy, and I'm really glad you're here. But won't your mom wonder where you are?"

"She was sleeping again when I left. I didn't want to bother her. I knew she wouldn't take me because I could see she'd been crying again. There was lots of tissues all around the couch." He was whispering like it was a big secret.

Claire nodded her head thoughtfully. She guessed it really was a secret. But what was she supposed to do with this sprite of a boy who had such incredible blue eyes and such a joyful spirit, when his mother had expressly forbidden her to talk to him again? And what about Tommy's sister? Was the mother sleeping while there was a four-year-old in the house?

She sighed, glancing at her watch. Almost 4:30. She would help him find some books and drive him home after she closed up at 6:00. She would just have to face the wrath of his mother once again. Maybe the woman would be in a better mood by supertime.

Claire knocked on the door of #16 Hotchkiss Lane, Tommy standing beside her. She was very tired. And what was that strange feeling in her stomach? Hunger? She hadn't felt hungry in ages. She knocked again. Tommy hopped from his left foot to his right, three well-worn library books clutched against his chest. "Don't worry, she'll let us in," he said in a voice that sounded like a familiar song to Claire.

"But what if she's still asleep?" Claire asked, leaning over the iron railing and trying to peer in the window. Unlike her own home, this house was much smaller, and there was no front porch. Also, there were no flowers, and the grass was still brown from the long Connecticut winter.

He shrugged, then jumped up and down again, almost dropping the books. "I know! I know! We can go in the back way." He led her around the side of the house through an overgrown and neglected garden to the back door which had once been green but was now peeling so badly that all Claire could see was the bare wood underneath. They climbed the three wobbly wooden steps and Tommy pushed hard on the door until it creaked open. The door led them into a kitchen, similar to Claire's own, but smaller, with worn appliances and a big sticky mess on the round table next to the door. Cereal and milk had been spilled and not cleaned up. A similar situation was happening on the counter by the sink, and in the sink.

Claire set her tote bag down on the floor by the door and wondered what to do. "Where do you think your mom is?" she asked, taking the books from Tommy's grasp and laying them on a part of the counter that was semi-clean.

Tommy grabbed her hand and pulled her down the dark hallway and into the small squareshaped living room. His mother was sleeping on the sofa, a threadbare brown blanket covering her. Her long black hair flowed over her face as she sleepily turned onto her side. "Shhhh," he said to Claire, putting his whole hand up to his mouth. "She doesn't like to be waked up when she's sleeping like this." He whispered so softly Claire had to bend down to hear him.

She shook her head. Did this woman just sleep all day? Was she sick? Was she on drugs? Something felt decidedly wrong with this whole situation. What was she supposed to do exactly? She couldn't leave the boy here, could she? This seemed an awful lot like neglect to her. Maybe Pastor Jamie would know what to do. She went back to the kitchen for her cell phone, and Tommy skipped after her, seemingly unaware that there was anything wrong with this scenario.

Just as she was reaching for her purse, her cell phone rang, blaring out at top volume, *All You Need is Love*. The Beatles. Caleb had programmed it in as her ringtone, so whenever anyone called, she was reminded of him. Not that she needed reminding. She almost dropped the purse, and then the phone, in an attempt to turn off the sound so as not disturb Tommy's mother. "Hello?" she said in a loud whisper. Tommy ran back to the living room and knelt beside the sofa.

"Mom? Hi Mom! It's Adrian."

Claire smiled and pressed her hand to her heart. "Hi dear, how are you?" She moved to the doorway to keep an eye on Tommy and his mother.

"Why are we whispering?" he asked, also whispering, and she could hear the grin in her voice.

Just then all hell broke loose in the living room. "What the hell are *you* doing here?" Tommy's mother screamed. Claire saw her sliding off the sofa, almost in slow motion, then stumbling down the short hallway to the kitchen. She had grabbed Tommy roughly by the upper arm and was dragging him behind her. He wasn't protesting.

"Mom?" Claire heard Adrian's voice through the cell phone speaker, and this time he wasn't whispering. "Mom! What's going on? Are you all right?"

The woman was now standing directly in front of Claire. She barely came up to Claire's chest. "I told you to leave my kid alone. Didn't you hear me?"

Claire stood, frozen, the phone to her ear; this woman was demanding an answer, and her son was probably getting more worried by the minute. She had to do something. This wasn't right. None of this was right. She turned slightly away from the woman and spoke quietly into the phone. "I'm okay, Adrian. I'll be home in a little while and I'll call you then." She clicked the phone off, then turned back to the woman.

"Your son walked almost three miles to the library this afternoon because he knew I worked there-" On hearing this, the woman yanked Tommy in front of her and swatted his bottom several times. Tommy took it without crying but Claire could see his lower lip trembling and his face becoming splotchy and red.

"Damn it, Tommy. You're supposed to come straight home from school and watch your sister. Didn't I tell you that?" Her voice was getting so loud, Claire thought the neighbors on the other side of the street could hear every word. "I know I told you that, mister!"

The mother smacked Tommy across the cheek and this time, the poor boy did let some tears slip down his face, but he stayed quiet. His bright blue eyes were darker now, and Claire saw no evidence of the joy that had been inside of him that morning. Her stomach tightened in fear for the little boy, and any earlier signs of hunger were now replaced with an incredible urge to vomit.

Claire reached for Tommy and pulled him away from the woman, moving both of them a few steps out of her reach.

The woman suddenly seemed to realize that she was out of line. She blinked several times, as if waking from a bad dream. She also backed away from them. "I'm sorry, Tommy," she said, but her voice was rough, and it came out like a hoarse bark. She reached out to him, totally ignoring Claire. "It's all right. I'm all right now, baby, come back over here." Tommy looked up at Claire who tightened her hold on him. He looked back and forth between Claire and his mother several times, thinking hard. Then he squirmed out of Claire's hold and went to his mother who pulled her to him in a rough hug. Claire didn't know if Tommy's mother's behavior was genuine, or if it was an act simply because a stranger was watching. She stood still, her heart pounding, wanting to do something, anything, but not sure what that thing might be. Tommy had obviously chosen his mother. And why wouldn't he? But what if he hadn't? She shook her head and realized that her whole body was slightly trembling.

The woman finally let go of Tommy and brushed her hair over her shoulders brusquely. "Look, I'm sorry, okay?" She looked at Claire warily, then reached out her right hand. "And I shouldn't've yelled at you this morning either. I'm Maudie. Maudie Fields. Tommy's mom."

This move surprised Claire so much she almost dropped the phone again which made her realize how tightly she was holding on to it. She tucked the phone in her pocket and shook Maudie's hand.

"I'm Claire Reynolds. I live two doors down." Maudie's hand felt dry and calloused, but she had a strong, if not welcoming, grip.

"Yeah, I've seen you out there now and then."

That seemed to be the end of the conversation. Claire cleared her throat. "Where is Tommy's little sister?" She tried to keep any judgment out of her voice.

Maudie blinked a few more times. "I—" She looked frantically around the room, then glanced down the hallway toward the stairs. "Tommy? Abby's in her room, right?"

"When I came home from school I took her over to Jazmine's house 'cause I was going to the library. I wouldn't ever leave her alone, you know." He kicked the wall.

"Jazmine?" Claire asked.

"Her friend. Lives on Sycamore." Maudie stood, hands on hips, daring Claire to say something negative.

Sycamore was two streets away from them, farther from the lake. "Tommy, that was a very smart thing that you did. Maudie, would you like me to drive over there and bring Abby home?"

"Nah, she can stay overnight."

"Does she stay overnight at Jazmine's a lot?"

Maudie stared at Claire for a moment. “I don’t see where that’s any of your damn business, *Claire*. You brought Tommy home, so I think your job here is done. Good-bye.” She took several steps toward Claire, edging her toward the kitchen and the doorway.

Tommy skipped over to Claire as she continued toward the back door to pick up her tote bag. “Thank you for showing me all the books!” He grinned slightly, but Claire could see something different in his eyes now, and his voice was subdued.

“Books? What books?” Maudie demanded.

Claire turned, her hand on the doorknob, and gestured toward the three books on the counter. “They’re library books, that’s all. When he’s done reading them, I’ll take them back to the library if you don’t want him to go there again.”

“Huh,” Maudie grunted. She picked up the books and held them over Tommy’s head. “If you’re good, you can have these tomorrow.” She squinted, looking down at him. “Got that?”

Tommy hung his head. “Yes, ma’am.”

Claire shook her head again and made her way down the rickety steps that led into the back yard. She was trying really hard not to be judgmental, but crimony, how could this woman treat a darling little boy like that? It seemed a crime, if not a sin. On the one hand, though, Maudie was right. It wasn’t any of Claire’s business, not really. But on the other hand, who else was going to look out for Tommy? Wasn’t Pastor Jamie always saying that everyone is connected, and that we are here to take care of one another? Wasn’t that Jesus’ message? And not just Jesus, but Buddha too? And every other spiritual leader who ever lived?

Claire considered all of this as she made her way home in the slim light of dusk. She dropped her tote bag and sweater on the kitchen table as she tried to decide what to do next. Should she eat? Should she do something about her neighbors, and if so- what exactly? But her thoughts were interrupted by her phone again. *All You Need is Love*. Indeed.

“Mom!” Adrian sounded like he was right there in her kitchen instead of forty-five miles away in Bayview. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, honey, I’m fine. I was over at the neighbor’s house and she . . . Well, she was in a bad mood.”

“I could hear that,” Adrian said and she could tell he was smiling. “Is this a new neighbor? The Callahans moved away, right?”

“Yes, they did, but that was last year and the McPhersons are there now but they’re a young couple and are hardly ever home. These people are on the other side of them, in that small cottage, the one that’s a bit run down.”

“Oh yeah, I remember that place. My friend Joe used to live there, right?”

Claire sighed. “That’s the one.”

“So who lives there now?”

“Oh. Well. It’s a long story, dear. I don’t think you want to hear-”

“Mom, come on. It was a long, boring day at the hospital and I’m stuck in traffic. Tell me something interesting.”

She stifled a smile. Adrian’s job at the hospital was anything but boring. He loved it there and he was a very good pediatric nurse, one of the best. “I doubt you had a boring day, Ade,” she said, using his childhood nickname. “But I’ll tell you anyway.” She plunked herself down in her favorite blue kitchen chair and told him everything, ending with, “I really would just like to help Tommy. What do you think I should do?” Her palms were sweating as she retold the story and her heart was beating faster. She rubbed her forehead and waited for her son to speak.

“Hang on a sec, let me check something online. This traffic’s not going anywhere,” Adrian replied. Claire’s body calmed at the reassuring sound of his *everything’s-under-control* voice. He got that from Caleb, she thought as she stood and took a couple of eggs out of the fridge. It felt good to be hungry again.

She kept the phone tucked between her shoulder and ear as she cracked the eggs into a metal bowl and added some milk and cheese, salt and pepper. Scrambled would be quick and easy. She could hear Adrian in the background muttering to himself. “I think you can make an anonymous call to CPS. Child Protective Services. You can call or do it online and there’s no legal ramifications. They send someone out to the family within twenty-four hours to do a case study and determine if abuse or neglect is really present.”

“But what would happen to Tommy?” Claire lit the gas burner and poured the egg mixture into a small red frying pan.

“According to this, that would be up to the social worker. I’ll send you the link. Check your email later and let me know how it goes. That mother didn’t sound very friendly. Do you think she’s dangerous?”

“I’ll say,” Claire said emphatically. “I saw her hit Tommy several times until he cried. Plus, she was asleep and didn’t even know her kids weren’t home.” “Wow. That’s definitely not good. But I meant- dangerous to *you*.”

“To *me*?” Her mouth watered and her stomach growled as she stirred the eggs and their buttery scent drifted upwards.

“Yeah. I mean, once someone comes to talk with her about whatever’s going on...”

She took the eggs off the stove and picked up a fork, then tasted a bit of warm, salty eggs. They were so good. “You’re saying that it wouldn’t exactly be anonymous, right? I mean, who else would be reporting her?”

“Right. She wouldn’t come after you or anything, would she?”

Claire took her plate to the kitchen table. She sank into the blue chair and lifted another chunk of the soft eggs into her mouth. “God, I hope not. I didn’t even think of that.” She chewed and thought. “What should I do, Ade? I can’t let it go. I just can’t let it go.”

“What about Pastor Jamie? He witnessed how she treated you this morning, right?”

“Yes, but he didn’t see her do anything to Tommy.”

“I know, but-” He paused. “Hang on a sec. Jon is on the other line.” As she waited, she imagined the conversation between the two of them. How fortunate he was that his beloved was still alive, waiting at home for him. Did he know how lucky he was? She finished her eggs and pushed aside the plate, feeling sated but still empty somehow. “Sorry, Mom.” Adrian came back on the line. “Jon was checking on my ETA. I’m gonna talk with him about this and see what other ideas we can come up with, okay?” Claire nodded even though she knew he couldn’t see her. “But, listen. Mom. The reason I called you was to let you know that we have definitely decided to have a baby. We’re either going to adopt or find a surrogate. Not sure which but we’re really doing the research now and we’ve even talked with a few possible surrogates. We wanted you to be the first to know, *Grandma!*”

Claire took a moment to process what he was telling her. Before Caleb had gotten so sick, Adrian had told them that he and Jonathan were thinking of becoming parents but they were looking at it from all angles and hadn’t made a decision. This was good news, indeed. She was going to be a grandmother, one way or another! “Oh honey, that’s the best news I’ve heard in such a long time. You guys are going to be the best fathers; I just know it.”

“Thanks Mom. Look, I’ve gotta go. The traffic is finally moving. Jon made supper and I’m still ten minutes from home. I’ll call you tomorrow to see what you’ve decided about Tommy, okay? Don’t do anything tonight. Sleep on it.”

“Yes, I’ll sleep on it.” That’s what Caleb always used to say. “Good night, dear. I love you.”

“Love you more.”

Caleb used to say that too.

After sitting in the gathering dusk on the front porch for a while, Claire made her way upstairs. She flipped open her laptop and stared at the screen, waiting for everything to finish loading. Lately it seemed like it was taking longer and longer, but she wasn’t sure because Caleb had usually been the one noodling around online. She sighed heavily, playing with her plain gold wedding band as she waited. The images on the screen were coming into focus, slowly but surely. She was aware that they absolutely would be clear, sooner or later. No question about it. She dearly wished that life was like that, that you could always count on things coming into final focus every single time. Like this situation with Tommy: could she please get some clarity on *that*? He was a little boy in a bad situation but would it be worse to take him away from the only mother he’d ever known? What kind of damage would potentially occur, either way?

She sighed again, brushing tears of frustration from her eyes. Her heart was already weighed down with the sorrow of her life's deepest life loss. Adding Tommy's plight to it made her feel like she was in over her head, drowning.

Chapter Four

Adrian

"Hey Jon!" Adrian called, dropping his jacket and backpack on the oak bench in the foyer. He walked up behind his husband who was at his desk in the small dining room just off the kitchen. Jon held up a finger, a writer's universal signal for "I'm in the middle of a really good paragraph and I'll be right with you." His shoulders were hunched over the computer and he was completely intent on whatever world he was creating, totally oblivious to the sweet, salty breeze that was wafting in through the open window.

Adrian lovingly touched Jon's tousled black hair and wandered into the kitchen, lifted the lid off the slow cooker and inhaled the rich scent of Jon's famous beef bourguignon. Man, he was hungry. It had been a long day at the hospital, one difficult emergency after the other. Not that all emergencies weren't difficult, but he worked on the pediatric ward and some days were just harder than others. He grabbed a bowl from one of the dark green cabinets and ladled a bit of the hearty stew into it.

"Hey, wait for me!" Jon burst into the kitchen, a bright bundle of energy, as usual. He threw his arms around Adrian and they held each other for a moment. Sheer bliss, to be together all these years. "Two peas in a pod," Adrian's mother liked to call them. Although they looked nothing alike- Adrian tall and fair, Jon medium build and olive skin- it was obvious to anyone who crossed their path that they belonged together.

Today Jon was wearing a bright red T-shirt and jeans; Adrian was still in his nurse's scrubs. "How's the book coming?" Adrian asked, getting another bowl from the cupboard while Jonathan laid out woven placemats, forks and knives.

"Not a book yet, hon. Just meandering around with an idea. Well, several ideas actually. I'm just seeing where it all takes me. You know how it is." He put a loaf of French bread from the corner

market on the table along with a crock of butter and sank happily into the chair across from Adrian's.

Yes, Adrian knew how it was. He smiled as he sat down and dug in. The salty warmth of the meat melded with the soft sweetness of the carrots and he sighed with pleasure. Jon had studied many things at the University of Connecticut where they'd met as freshman, both a bit naïve and overexcited at their newfound freedom. One thing was sports medicine, another was business and accounting, and then there had been the year of graphic design courses. He'd even taken several classes in the culinary arts. Jon had excelled at all of the above. But the thing that had captivated him the most was creative writing. And he was good, really good. Granted, Adrian didn't particularly care for "science fiction romance" which was Jon's favorite genre, but he was a voracious reader and he knew good writing when he saw it. Also, Jon's first book, *Andromeda in Love*, had sold a couple of million copies, so there were plenty of others who agreed with Adrian.

"My agent is begging me for the first two chapters of the sequel, but she's just gonna have to wait 'til Lady Inspiration strikes again, or hits me hard over the head with a two by four! Hey, do you want some wine?"

"Sure, maybe some red."

Jon jumped up and grabbed some heavy teal goblets from the counter, a wedding gift from one of Jon's many sisters. He poured some Argentinian Malbec and then raised his glass to Adrian's. "To us, and to the family that we're going to create together."

"To our family," Adrian agreed, sipping and savoring the liquid on his tongue before swallowing. "By the way, have you talked with Theresa yet? Or Cassandra? From the surrogacy service?"

"Done, and done," Jon replied, setting down his glass emphatically. Theresa seems like a good match, right? But Cassandra has already committed to another couple." He took another bite of beef and chewed quickly. "I don't know . . ." He shook his head as he slathered a good deal of butter on a chunk of the bread.

Adrian's stomach did a little flip flop. "What do you mean?" he asked cautiously. Was Jon about to change his mind?

"Oh hon, no. *No*. It's not what you're thinking!" He reached over and laid his hand on top of Adrian's for a few seconds. Their matching gold and onyx wedding rings gleamed in the kitchen light. "I want this all to happen, like *yesterday!*" He grinned and Adrian relaxed a little. "It's just that I'm not sure if I want to go through the whole thing of the egg fertilization and waiting to see if the surrogate gets pregnant and then waiting nine whole months." He sighed dramatically and stabbed a carrot with his fork. "I'm leaning more toward adoption."

"Oh, good. I was a little worried that you were going to change your mind." Adrian reached for the bread.

“Never gonna do that again. *Ever.*” Jonathan replied emphatically. “That was a one-time thing. Cold feet. You know how it is.”

Adrian didn’t know about cold feet. He’d wanted children of his own since he was seven years old, clamoring for a baby brother or sister. His parents, however, had had other ideas, and none of them involved more children. “Okay,” he said, finishing off the stew. “By the way, this was your best recipe yet. Did you save this one?”

“I did!” Jon smiled brightly and patted himself on the back. “I’m so proud of myself. It’s in the recipe box that your mom gave us.”

Adrian put his hands in prayer position and made a mock bow to his husband. “I thank you and my stomach thanks you.” They laughed. He set his napkin beside his plate and rubbed his stomach. “Speaking of my mom...”

Jon looked up from his last forkful of meat. “Is she all right?” He shook his head. “That poor, poor woman. I don’t know how she can-”

“She’s fine, Jon.” He paused, frowning. “Well, not exactly fine, of course. I mean, Dad’s only been gone six weeks. But I called her this afternoon to check in and there was like, I don’t know, a madwoman yelling at her in the background. I was thrown for a loop.”

“What? What happened?”

He told him about Tommy and his mother while Jon stared at him, sipping his wine slowly.

“Oh. My. God. That is just the most horrible thing I’ve heard in a long time. What on earth is she going to *do*?” Jon jumped up and began clearing the dishes from the table.

Adrian shook his head. “I’m really not sure. She was quite upset about all of it. I told her to sleep on it and not to do anything tonight.”

“She can report it anonymously, right?”

“Sure.” Adrian scooped the remaining stew into a glass dish, then set it on the counter to cool. “But I’m pretty sure the woman, Maudie, will know it was her.”

“Oh my.” Jon leaned against the counter by the sink and crossed his arms over his chest. “She could be dangerous. And she’s living two houses away from your mother. Dios mio,” he murmured, reverting to his mother’s native Spanish. “I know, but I’m not sure what we can actually do about it.”

“Well,” Jon said, clapping his hands together, then taking Adrian’s hand in his. “On Saturday, we’ll just have to take a drive up to Penbrook and have a little visit. Let’s see for ourselves what’s going on. Shall we?”

“I have an early morning shift that day, but I’ll be home around 3:30. Let’s go then, okay? That’ll give you more time for your writing. We’ll stop by Jordan’s Bakery and bring mom some of their famous tiramisu. That’ll perk her up a bit.”

“I’m with you, Ade, I’m with you.” They embraced again, Adrian soaking up Jon’s warmth and energy, and Jon grounding himself in Adrian’s solid strength.

Chapter Five

Tommy

I wish I had a dad. Most of the kids in my class at school have a dad. But I just don’t have one. That’s what Mama told me anyway. “No dad for you, kid,” she used to say. “That’s just how it is. Just be glad you got a mama to take care of you.”

And I used to believe her. I liked believing her. But yesterday my new friend Marcos told me that everyone has to have a father even if they don’t *know* who it is, and that is how babies are made. And I was like, “*What?*” So Marcos told me everything. All of it. How the baby is made and all of that. And so I know now that there has to be a man and a woman.

Marcos has something called a stepdaddy which is when the real daddy goes away and the mommy finds someone else to make babies with. Or something like that. Marcos has a baby brother named Rio whose real daddy is Marcos’ stepdaddy. It gets a little confusing sometimes but I think I get it. So I guess Mama lied to me. I don’t like thinking about Mama lying to me actually. I get a funny feeling in my stomach when I think about it. I wish she had just told me the truth. Whatever *that* is. Marcos told me I should ask her who she had sex with, what *man* she had sex with, because that is the only way I could get born. But I don’t know about that. I get that stomachache feeling when I think about asking her that. She might slap me again. Or leave.

The other day when I came home from school she wasn’t there. Abby was in her room sleeping and I woke her up but she didn’t know where Mama was either. Mama hasn’t been in such a good mood lately. I was scared but I knew I had to take care of Abby so I played with her and I made her toast for supper and gave her a glass of milk. I couldn’t eat because I wasn’t hungry and that is strange for me because usually I really like to eat. Especially mac and cheese. When I

was little Mama used to make the real kind. She called it Mac and Cheese From Scratch but I don't know why because it didn't make me itchy and it was really, really good.

That day when Mama wasn't home, I watched *SpongeBob* with Abby until she got sleepy again and I put her to bed but I didn't give her a bath because I thought it might not be safe. Miss Peterson, she's my teacher- I'm in second grade -is teaching us about safety and being safe so I've been thinking a lot about that lately. Mostly she is telling us about how to be safe riding our bikes and walking home from school and not talking to strangers, but I don't have a bike and the other stuff is just common sense. Miss Peterson said we have to be thinking about how to keep ourselves safe and that is true I think, but I also know that I have to be thinking about how to keep Abby safe. And maybe Mama too.

I made myself stay awake that night because I wanted to keep Abby and me safe. I don't know what I would have done if a bad man came and tried to get into the house, but I stayed near the phone in case I had to call 9-1-1. That's another way to keep safe. Mama came home at 2:26 a.m. exactly. I know because I play this game with the electric clock in the kitchen. It's the kind with the little number pages that flip over every time a minute passes, or an hour. The game I play is to close my eyes every once in a while, because it hurts to keep them open a long time when I'm tired. But I try to see if I can open them exactly when one of the little pages flips over. Sometimes I do and sometimes I don't. One time I missed a whole hour when I shut my eyes. But my eyes were open when I heard Mama's key in the front door. And it was 2:26. In the *morning*, in case you haven't been paying attention.

Then Mama slammed the door and she slid down in front of it 'til she was sitting on the floor. And she was crying. I squeezed my eyes shut and when I opened them again it was 2:31. She was still on the floor in front of the door but she wasn't crying. It looked like she was sleeping. So I went over to her and shook her to wake her up but she didn't, not really. I pulled her up and I got her onto the couch and covered her with a blanket. She smelled funny, not like she usually smells, but I don't know what the smell was. I really, really wanted to give her some more lilacs from that nice lady Claire's garden but I was so sleepy and besides, she told me she gave them back and to never go near Miss Claire again. Which I didn't understand because Miss Claire was really nice to me and usually it's safe to be around nice people.

Also I wanted to lay down beside Mama there on the sofa but I was afraid that when she woke up she might not like it that I was there, so I went upstairs and checked Abby to make sure she was sleeping okay and then I went into my own room and closed my eyes and pretty soon it was time to get up to go to school.

Chapter Six

Claire

“Look Mom, we brought tiramisu from Jordan’s Bakery. Your favorite!”

“That looks delicious,” Claire said, kissing her son on the cheek as she took the container and set it in the fridge. “Would you mind grilling this chicken while Jonathan and I make a salad?”

“Not at all,” Adrian replied. He didn’t know why, after all these years, his mother insisted on calling Jon by his full name, but he actually liked it.

“You know me; I love making salads!” exclaimed Jonathan, giving Claire a bear hug. She buried her face in his shoulder for a moment and he kept his arms around her, raising his eyebrows quizzically at Adrian. “Are you okay, Mom?” He turned his attention back to her. Adrian and Jon both called each other’s mothers ‘Mom,’ much to their delight.

“Yes. Yes, of course,” Claire said, wiping her eyes and moving back to the sink to wash her hands. “I’m just so happy to see you both. Jonathan, grab some romaine and carrots and cukes from the fridge, would you? And Adrian, the chicken is on the bottom shelf. I used that lemon garlic marinade that you like.”

An hour later, as the three of them were eating at the picnic table in the back yard, Pastor Jamie arrived. The men all shook hands and they settled him in with a plate, silverware, and plenty of food.

“We were just starting to talk about Tommy and his family,” Claire said, wiping her mouth with her napkin and taking a sip of water.

“Any more interactions since the library situation?” Jamie asked.

“No. It’s been quiet. And Tommy hasn’t been by the library again. But I can’t stop worrying about him and his little sister. She’s only four.”

“We did some research online. In Connecticut you can report neglect or abuse anonymously and someone from the state will come and do a home check.” Adrian set down his fork and laid both hands on the table. “But we don’t know what will happen if Tommy’s mother believes that Mom made the call. She might be dangerous.”

Jamie shook some Ranch dressing onto his salad and took a bite, crunching loudly. “On the other hand, it might be equally dangerous *not* to say something.”

“That’s right!” Jonathan agreed. “One way or the other, there’s bound to be a consequence. But it sure doesn’t sound like a safe place for little kids to be. Don’t we *have* to do something about it?”

“I think we do.” Claire folded her napkin carefully and laid it on the table. She looked around at the three men: her son, her son-in-law, her pastor. They were her strength now that Caleb was gone. Her reason for living. Until Tommy. “I’ve decided to-”

At that moment, all four of them turned toward a sound in the driveway. The gentle slap-slap of little feet wearing flip flops.

“Who’s there?” Claire called, standing up quickly and running to the side of the house.

“Tommy?” She paused as she caught sight of him. He was wearing blue pajama bottoms and a grimy-looking white T-shirt. This time he had on worn flip flops that looked like they’d seen better days. As he turned to look at her, she noticed tear stains on his cheeks. His brown hair was sticking up all over, matted together from days of not being washed, and there were dark circles under his eyes. *Why should any seven-year-old have dark circles?* she wondered, then squatted down and reached out to him. “Tommy, honey. Come here and tell me what’s going on. Maybe I can help you.”

He shook his head and stayed where he was. “I gotta go back. Abby’s alone and it’s not *safe* to leave her alone.” He stared at Claire defiantly, yet there was vulnerability etched on his young face.

Claire hesitated. Maudie had left them alone again? She felt anger rising inside her chest but softened her voice so he wouldn’t hear it. “Don’t worry, Tommy. I’ll come back to your house with you so you won’t be alone.”

Tommy looked up at her, his blue eyes widening. “You will?”

Claire nodded. “I will.” She glanced back toward the picnic table. “And we have some chicken left over from our supper. I can bring it with me. Are you hungry?”

“Yes, Miss Claire. Abby is crying and there wasn’t any more cereal in the cupboard so I came over to ask if you had some peanut butter because Abby really likes peanut butter. But then I saw that you had company visiting and I didn’t want to bother you so I decided to go back home and wait for Mama.” He took a breath and continued to gaze at her. His hopefulness tugged at her heart.

“Mom, what’s going on?” Adrian came around the corner and caught sight of the young boy.

“Tommy, this is my son, Adrian. He came to visit with his husband Jonathan, and the other man you saw is our Pastor Jamie.”

Adrian held out his right hand and bent down a little when he noticed Tommy gazing up at him.

“You’re tall,” Tommy said solemnly as he shook Adrian’s hand.

“Yes, I am.” Adrian smiled and touched him lightly on the shoulder.

“Tommy was just telling me that he and Abby are alone, so I’m going to go over there and stay with them ‘til Maudie comes home.”

“Sure. I’ll come too. I’ll just go tell Jon and Jamie.” He turned and headed toward the back yard and called over his shoulder, “I’ll bring the rest of the chicken too, in case they’re hungry.”

“Thanks, hon, and there’s peanut butter and bread in the kitchen.”

“Okay, I’ll grab that too!”

Claire took Tommy’s hand and they hurried down the driveway, not wanting to leave Abby alone a minute longer.

Chapter Seven

Tommy

I just wanted me and Abby to be safe. And it didn't feel safe because Mama wasn't here when I got up to go to school. I stayed home 'cause I know it isn't safe to leave Abby here alone. The phone rang and rang at 9:00 exactly and I think it was the school wondering where I was so I didn't answer it because I knew I shouldn't tell them that Mama wasn't here. I gave Abby the last of the cereal for breakfast but there wasn't anything left in the fridge, and the freezer only had smelly ice cubes. There was some bread in the cupboard but it had green spots on it and it didn't smell good either so I threw that out.

My stomach hurt all day 'cause I didn't know where Mama was and also I was hungry too. Even if sometimes she went away at night, she was always there when I got up to go to school even if she was sleeping which she usually was. And once in a while she would go to the store on the corner to get us food. That usually happened on the day that she got the white envelope in the mail with the check in it. But the last time that happened was a week ago and we already ate all the food that she bought that day.

I didn't know what to do besides try to take care of Abby. I watched TV with her and then I colored pictures with her and then she took a nap so I did too. When I woke up she was crying and wanting supper and then my stomach hurt even more because I didn't know how to make food when there was no food to make.

It was starting to get dark and my head was hurting from Abby's crying. It was like my heart was hurting too because I love Abby so much and I wanted her to stop crying.

Then I thought of Miss Claire who had all the pretty lilacs. She was crying too, that day I saw her in her yard. So she knows what it's like to cry I guess. But I don't know why she was crying. I don't think it's 'cause she was hungry though. Maybe she didn't feel safe. Or maybe her mama went away too. But anyway, I thought of Miss Claire and I decided to go over there to see if she had some peanut butter because Abby was so hungry and I didn't know when Mama was coming home.

And then all of a sudden there were so many *people* here. There has never been this many people in our house. The only people who ever have been here are Mama and me and Abby. And the other day, Claire. So it was strange. But it was also kind of nice.

First of all there's Claire. I already know her. Aid-ree-in is her son and I knew that right away because he looks a lot like her. They are both tall and have blonde hair except Claire's is also

kind of gray. They also both have something else that is the same but I don't know what you call it. It's something like how they look at me and I like it when they look at me like that.

Then there is Jon or Jonathan. I don't know which name he is because Miss Claire calls him the long one and Adrian calls him the short one. I guess maybe he's both. He doesn't look anything like Miss Claire or her son. He is shorter and he has curly black hair like my friend Marcos. I like calling him Jon because it's easier to say than Jonathan. Claire said he was Adrian's husband but I'm not sure she said that right because if you're a husband, wouldn't you have a wife and not another husband? I definitely don't get that. But Jon is really nice, and he actually sat on the floor with me and Abby after Miss Claire gave us chicken and salad and peanut butter sandwiches. I didn't ever think that I would like salad, or that peanut butter and chicken would taste so good in a meal together but I didn't ever think I would be that hungry either.

So Jon sat on the floor with me and Abby, and we were playing this game with her blocks and it was fun and I almost forgot that Mama wasn't here. I said *almost*, in case you weren't paying attention.

While we were playing, Miss Claire and her son and Pastor Jamie (who also is very nice but he has red hair like my teacher Miss Peterson) were standing in the kitchen talking in very soft voices. I was glad they were there. My stomach didn't hurt anymore and Jon was making me and Abby laugh so hard. It felt safe. Okay, I was still worried, but it was a *small* worry only.

In a little while, I saw flashing blue lights making bright patterns through our curtains and I got up to look out the window. There were two police people coming up our sidewalk. They were walking very fast. One was a woman with curly brown hair and the other was a short bald man with glasses and a round face. Otherwise I would say policemen. But one was a man and the other was a woman so I decided to call them police people. I wondered if they would be able to find Mama and bring her back.

Pastor Jamie and Miss Claire opened the door and talked with the police people. Abby saw them and got scared but I told her it was okay even though I wasn't really sure that it was. Jon stopped the game and watched as the police lady came over to us. I was surprised because she sat right down on the floor and picked up a few of the blocks. "Hi guys, I'm Alicia. This looks like a fun game you've got going here," she said and she smiled right at me. I smiled back because her smile made me happy. Which is weird because I didn't think I could be happy when I should have been worried that Mama was gone.

"Yeah," I said and gave Abby two of my blocks so she could start to build another tower.

"I see you've got some new friends here." She glanced over at Jon and he shook her hand.

"Yes, I'm Jonathan Delgado and we're here to see that the kids are okay. They don't know where their mom is and we didn't think it was safe for them to be alone."

"Well you did the right thing," she said. Her voice reminded me of Miss Peterson's, all soft and fluttery, but I could tell that Alicia was strong too, and it wasn't just because I knew she had a gun. All police people carry guns. I knew that because I watched TV a lot. But I never let Abby

watch the police shows with me. I only like watching them because they make me feel more safe inside.

“So, your name is Tommy, and this is Abby, right?”

I nodded and stared at Abby’s small tower. I knew what Alicia was going to ask me next.

“Do you know where your mom went, Tommy?”

I looked down and shook my head and my stomach started hurting again. Jon scooted a little closer to me so that he could put his hand on my shoulder. I liked how that felt. It felt like I could breathe again but also like I wanted to cry.

“That’s okay. You’re being very brave. When was the last time you saw her?”

“She was here when I came home from school yesterday and she was sleeping on the couch when I put Abby to bed.”

“Is this the first time she went away like this?” Alicia kept writing in her little notebook while we talked.

I looked up at Jon and he squeezed my shoulder just a little bit, like he was telling me that it was okay to tell Alicia the truth. Miss Peterson used a word once. *Encouraging*. That’s how I felt when Jon squeezed my shoulder like that. I shook my head again. “Sometimes she goes away at night but she always comes back before I have to go to school,” I said and my voice came out like a whisper. I didn’t mean to whisper, but it felt like I was telling a bad secret and maybe that is why I was whispering. Because you whisper secrets even if they are the truth. I knew Mama wouldn’t be happy that I told this secret but she wasn’t there to stop me and it felt like the right thing to do.

“I see.” And then Alicia said something strange. She said, “I’m sorry.” I didn’t know why she was sorry though. It wasn’t her fault that I didn’t know where Mama went. Maybe if I had been better behaved, or if Abby didn’t cry so much, she wouldn’t have to go away like that.

I shrugged and started building a new tower with Abby but Alicia said something else and it makes me feel good inside and all over. She said, “You did a very smart thing, Tommy. You went to Claire’s house to get some help. I’m really glad you did that.”

“I just wanted to take care of Abby,” I told her as I added three more blocks to the tower.

“Well, you did exactly that and we are all very proud of you.”

Jon said, “I agree, buddy. You’re a very smart boy.” He stood up and told me he’d be back, then he went to join the other adults by the door. Alicia followed him.

Chapter Eight

Claire

“They’re both asleep,” Claire said, tiptoeing down the stairs where Adrian and Jon were waiting for her that night after the others had left. “I don’t understand how a mother can just up and leave two little kids like that.” She settled in a dingy brown arm chair and rested her head on the back of it for a moment.

“You never know,” Adrian replied. “What if she just went out for some milk and got into an accident?”

“Or drugs. There’s always drugs,” Jonathan said grimly, flicking on his phone to check for messages, then flipping it over beside him on the sofa.

Claire shook her head. “They searched the whole house and found no sign of drugs or anything unusual.”

“And the kids have no relatives whatsoever?”

“Tommy said he didn’t know of any grandparents or other relatives, or even who his father is. I looked too, and there isn’t much here in the way of personal belongings.” “How long are the police going to let you stay here with them?” Adrian asked.

“I’m not sure.” Claire yawned wearily.

“Because if Maudie doesn’t come back, they’re going to have to go into foster care, aren’t they?”

“I suppose so.” Tears sprang to Claire’s eyes just thinking about it. If that were to happen, what were the chances that Tommy and Abby could stay together?

Jonathan stood up and stretched. “I imagine they might have to go into the system even if she does come back. It’s a criminal offense to abandon one’s own children, isn’t it?”

“The police were noncommittal about all of that. It depends on her story when she comes back. They’ve got APBs out all over the northeast for her. Tommy said the car was small and white with red duct tape holding one of the front lights on, so that was helpful. And we found a photo of her with the kids that looks like it was taken a couple of years ago.”

Claire’s phone rang- *All You Need is Love* -and she answered before the third word. Adrian and Jonathan watched as she frowned and nodded. Then she stood up quickly and hurried into the kitchen, still listening to the voice on the other end. When she came back, her eyes were red and she was trying to hold back tears.

“Mom? What’s going on?”

“They found Maudie. It looks like her car ran off the road and over the Chamberlin Bridge into Lake Penbrook. They think it might be suicide. Alicia said something about the tire marks and the entry point of the car. They have to haul the car out of the lake and get the body to the coroner’s office before they’ll say for sure.” She stood in the center of the living room, clutching the phone to her chest.

Adrian and Jonathan guided her to the sofa, scrunching in on either side of her. She leaned into them. “What am I going to tell Tommy? And Abby too. Oh those poor children.”

Adrian handed her some tissue from a box on the low table in front of the couch. When she had calmed a bit, Jonathan asked, “Did the police suggest that *you* tell Tommy and Abby?”

“No.” She blew her nose and tucked the tissue into her pocket. “But I told them that I would. Who else? At least they know me. Well, Tommy knows me anyway.”

“Sure,” Adrian said. “It will be better coming from someone they know. Of course. But how are you going to-“ “I honestly have no idea,” Claire replied. “I’ll stay here with the kids tonight. You boys can sleep in the guest room at my house. Do you think I should ask Pastor Jamie to come here first thing in the morning?”

“Definitely. He’ll be good at something like this. Let me call him.” Adrian gently took the phone from his mother’s hands.

Chapter Nine

Adrian

Pastor Jamie knocked on the Fields' front door bright and early the next morning, just as Adrian and Jon were coming across the lawn. "Hey, Jamie, thanks for coming. Mom's pretty upset." They all shook hands as Claire let them in.

"Glad to be here. You shouldn't have to do this alone."

Claire looked tired, probably from sleeping – or not sleeping – on the sofa all night, and her usually pressed clothing was wrinkled and looked like, well- like she'd slept in them. "There's no coffee," she said, leading them into the kitchen, "But I do have some leftover biscuits that I brought over last night."

"We'll eat later," Adrian replied, pulling his mom to him in a brief hug. "Maybe we can take the kids out for breakfast."

"I hadn't thought of that," Claire said with a big sigh. "I don't know when the police are coming or if they will send a social worker from CFS. They weren't very clear about what would happen next."

Just then Tommy shuffled slowly into the kitchen, yawning in front of the four adults. "Is Mama back yet?" Claire went to him and squatted in front of him. "No honey, she's not here." She stroked his hair away from his eyes. "Are you hungry? There are some biscuits left from last night, and maybe later we can all go out to breakfast. Would you like that?" She stood, gazing down at him, unsure of what to say next or how to break the bad news.

Tommy's eyes brightened at the thought of going out to breakfast. He quickly ran to Jon's side and pulled on his hand excitedly. "Can we please go to MacDonald's?" he asked hopefully, just a little tremor of uncertainty in his voice, as if he had asked this question many times before and been turned down flat just as many times.

Jon looked over at Adrian in surprise, and Adrian thought his husband's face looked just as bright and happy as Tommy's. Adrian gave them both the thumbs up sign. "Wherever you want to go, kiddo," he said.

"Can Pastor Jamie come too?" Tommy asked, noticing the red-haired man standing quietly beside Claire by the sink.

"I would love to have breakfast with all of you," Jamie said with a gentle smile. "But first, there's something that Claire needs to tell you. Actually, it's something that we all need to tell you. And then maybe you can help us to tell Abby."

"Okay," Tommy said quietly, taking his hand out of Jon's and putting his thumb in his mouth.

Chapter Ten

Tommy

I hate sucking my thumb. I'm almost eight, you know. My birthday is June 8. Sucking thumbs is for babies, like my sister Abby does when she goes to sleep. But when Pastor Jamie said that Claire had something she needed to tell me, my stomach started to hurt again. I mean, it really hurt bad and that's how I knew that something bad had happened to Mama. I knew already, before they even said it, that Mama wasn't ever coming back.

They sat me in the center of the couch and Pastor Jamie was on one side and Claire was on the other. She put her arm around me and said, "Tommy, your Mama was in a very bad accident and she got hurt really bad, so she can't come home again."

"Is she dead?" I had to ask. I already mostly knew. But I had to ask.

Claire looked like she was about to cry, so Pastor Jamie reached over and patted my hands which were in my lap. "Yes, Tommy, she's dead."

I didn't want to cry. I really didn't. But I did. I cried and cried and I let Claire pull me onto her lap. She smelled like those lilacs which is really weird because there weren't any in my house and I don't think she went back over to her house last night. I like how lilacs smell as much as Mama does. I mean, as much as Mama *did*.

The worst thing is that while I was crying, Abby came downstairs crying too. Only she was just crying because she was hungry or she had a bad dream like she usually does, not because she knew that Mama wasn't coming back. Ever again.

The funny thing is that she stopped crying as soon as she saw all of us in the living room. When she noticed *me* crying, her eyes got big and I could tell she was scared, but she ran right over to Adrian and lifted her arms up, like she used to do with Mama. It was her way of saying, "Pick me up right now." And guess what? Adrian did pick her up. He held her and rubbed her back just the way Abby liked it. The way Mama used to hold Abby when she was littler.

Adrian looked really surprised that Abby just ran to him like that, and I noticed all the adults looking at each other in a happy way, but you could tell they were surprised too. I felt better, knowing that Abby was being held like that. I couldn't hold her like that. Not yet anyway. But then I suppose that when I get tall enough to hold her like that, Abby will be too big to be held like that. But still.

I could tell that Claire was getting ready to say something to Abby, but I decided that *I* was going to be the one to tell her about Mama. I was her big brother, after all. I wiped my eyes with a tissue that Pastor Jamie gave me and then I went to Abby and tugged on her leg. That's when Adrian sat down on the floor with her. She was sucking her thumb and looking at me with her big blue eyes. "Just like *your* eyes," Mama always said. Mama's eyes were brown and her hair

was black. Maybe Abby and me got our blue eyes and our brown hair from our dad, but we don't know who he is or where he is. Mama always said it was better if we didn't know.

"Abby-Gabby," I said, and I started our own private hand clapping game that we made up together when she was three. She sat on Adrian's lap and clapped with me as I said the little rhyme. Then. "I have something to tell you now. Let's play the Listening Game first." Abby put her hands behind her ears like I taught her so she could learn to pay attention better. "You know how Mama wasn't home yesterday like she should be?" Abby nodded solemnly. "Well, she's not coming home again. Not ever again. She got hurt really bad and she can't come home. Do you understand?"

Abby stared at me. I know she knew what I was saying. She was four years old and we talked a lot about a lot of things. "Mama's gone?"

"Yes, Mama's gone. I'm sorry."

"I love Mama."

"I love Mama too, Abby."

"I want Mama to come home." She started crying and kicking her feet against Adrian's crisscrossed legs. He unfolded them so they were straight out and open wide, and her feet were just kicking onto the floor. I thought that was pretty smart of him.

Claire came over and sat on the floor with us and she took Abby from Adrian and held her the way Mama used to when Abby was a baby. She rocked my sister and sang a little song in a whispery voice but I couldn't hear the words. It sounded nice, though. Abby kind of wilted when Claire started singing to her but she was still crying a little.

Jon came over then and sat down next to me on the floor. He pulled me over so I was leaning against him and we all sat like that for a long time. Everyone was crying, Abby the most and me the second most and everyone else just a little bit. It was really strange but right then, I didn't miss Mama at all. And I felt really, really safe even though I felt so sad. I didn't like to think about Mama getting hurt. She wasn't always nice to us lately but she used to be really good to us when we were littler and I was sad thinking about those good times and then how different she got to be. I don't know why she got so mean lately. I know she was tired and she slept a lot of the time but I still think she loved us. I think I would know it if she had stopped loving us.

Chapter Eleven

Claire

After breakfast, they brought Tommy and Abby to Claire's house to wait for the social worker. It was amazing what a few egg sandwiches, pancakes, and chocolate milk could do for two sad children. And the strawberry milkshakes that Jonathan procured for everyone hadn't hurt either. She had been impressed, watching him handle the breakfast orders. He had asked for the shakes with all of the breakfast requests but was told they weren't on the menu until 10:30. He patiently explained that they were for two children whose mother had just died, and pointed in our direction.

The pimply young man had shrugged and said he was sorry but they didn't do shakes until after breakfast. So Jonathan had firmly asked for the manager, and a middle-aged whippet of a man walked over. After listening to the story and studying the kids for several moments, he sighed and made the milkshakes himself. Then, much to everyone's surprise, he refused payment. "On the house," Jonathan said happily as he set the frothy pink drinks down on the table, much to the kids' delight.

Now, tummies full and slight smiles restored, Tommy and Abby were on the sofa reading a library book that Claire had brought home a few nights ago. Rather, Tommy was reading the book to Abby and she was sucking her thumb, entranced.

"It's after nine," Claire said, sitting on the edge of the sofa. "I should call Jarmon and let him know I won't be in until after the social worker leaves." She shook her head and looked over at her son as she pulled the phone of her pocket. "I've missed so many days at the library since your dad died."

Tommy stopped midsentence and stared at Adrian with new interest. "You had a daddy? And he died?"

"Died?" echoed Abby.

"Yes, that's right. His name was Caleb and he got very sick last winter." Adrian cleared his throat, remembering.

"We don't have a daddy but our mommy died too." This from Abby who spoke the most words Claire had heard her speak since she'd met her.

"I'm sorry," Adrian said quietly. "You must feel very sad." "Sad,"

Abby repeated, nodding her head emphatically.

She turned back to the book but Tommy was also gazing at the adults around him in fascination. "Your father died." He pointed to Adrian, who nodded. Then he turned to Claire. "And Adrian's

father was your husband.” He pointed to Claire, saying these statements matter-of-factly as if all the pieces to a difficult puzzle were finally falling into place.

Claire nodded, curious as to where all of this was heading. She soon found out.

“So you’re sad too and that’s why you were crying when I saw you the other day by the lilac flowers?”

Claire held her hand over her heart, astounded at the boy’s insight. “That’s exactly right, Tommy.”

“Then I’m sorry too. About your husband.” Tommy pulled Abby a little closer. He turned his head towards Adrian who was standing beside Claire. “And your dad.” Adrian swallowed hard and nodded his head.

“Thank you, dear,” Claire replied, turning to Adrian and resting her head on his shoulder for a moment.

Tommy began to read the book to Abby again, but she took her thumb out of her mouth and interrupted him. “Mithter Jon, do you know thomeone who ith died too?”

Jon, who had been quietly rocking in his favorite rocker across from the sofa, seemed startled by the question. He ran his hands through his hair, studying the floor. Then he looked up at the little girl. “Yes, Abby. My grandmother died a few years ago. We called her Nanny Dee. She was like a mother to me and I’m very sad because I miss her a lot.”

Abby pushed herself off the couch and ran over to Jon, patting him on the knee. He stopped rocking and she reached up on tiptoe so she could kiss his cheek. “We all thad,” she declared, looking solemnly around at everyone. Then she began laughing and screeching as Jon picked her up and lifted her high in the air, his hands securely under her arms.

“You’ve got to get some of the sadness out to make room for the happy,” Jon said, holding her in his arms and dancing around the room. Claire clapped her hands in delight, her heart feeling lighter than it had in ages. How Caleb would have loved this scene, and these children.

Jon plopped down on the sofa and held Abby on his lap while Tommy continued to read the colorful picture book aloud. Claire and Adrian stood, watching this unique tableau with pleasure.

Chapter Twelve

Adrian

The social worker introduced herself as Renee Abernathy. Everything about her was short- her height as well as her blond wavy hair, her denim skirt, and the socks that peeped out of her brown leather ankle boots. It seemed to Adrian that she was very, very young. Too young. How long had she been doing this job, and could they trust her to make the right decision? It seemed to him that someone with more experience might be a better fit for this particular case.

Renee smiled at everyone and sat down on the sofa with the children. She admired the book that Tommy was reading, then said kindly, "I'm so sorry about your mom."

Abby's eyes filled with tears but surprisingly, they didn't spill over. Tommy simply murmured, "Thank you," and continued to stare at his book.

The adults were silent while Renee opened her briefcase and took out a pink legal pad. She clicked her purple ballpoint pen a few times, then cheerfully said, directly to Adrian, "I know a lot of people think I look really young, but I'm actually twenty-nine and I've been doing this for seven years. Longer even, if you count the years I was an intern for the same agency." "Oh. Well. Thank you for letting us know." Adrian wondered how she knew what he'd been thinking, but then she probably got questioned about her age a lot and was just anticipating it. Or maybe she'd seen the question in his eyes. Jon always said he had a telltale face.

"So, let's figure out what to do with these little guys," Renee said, opening a manila file folder and flipping through the few pages that were inside. "This is Tommy, age seven-

"I'm almost eight," Tommy interrupted, looking up from the book.

"Right. Seven-almost-eight," Renee said with a smile, continuing to look at the papers in the folder. "And Abby is four."

"She just turned four," Tommy replied proudly. "Her birthday was in April which was last month. We kind of had a party. Mama brought ice cream home that day because that's Abby's favorite. And we sang to Abby like we did when we were littler. Remember, Abby?" Abby nodded, still sucking her thumb.

Renee smiled. "Okay, so we've established their ages. And the three of you-" She nodded her head to the adults. "You are the neighbors?"

"Yes, that's right," Claire said, clasping her hands in front of her for a moment. "My husband died in March, so I was otherwise occupied when their family moved in. I just met Tommy last week."

“Did you meet Maudie too?”

“Yes, briefly. I gave Tommy some lilacs to give to her and she came over that same morning and... well, she flung them back at me and told me to leave her and her family alone.”

Tommy frowned and looked at his shoes. “Lilacs *were* her favorite flower,” he murmured to himself. Claire patted his head.

“Did you ever see her after that?”

“Yes. That same day Tommy walked all the way to the library where I work and when I brought him home she was very angry that I was there. She was angry at Tommy too. She spanked him, hard, right in front of me, and she even slapped him across the face.”

Renee looked at Tommy. “Is this true?”

He nodded slowly, his face turning pink with embarrassment.

“Did she spank you a lot? Or hit you anywhere else?”

Tommy twisted his hands together and looked at the floor.

“It’s okay, buddy,” Jon said. “Renee is here to help you.”

Tommy shrugged. “She never hit us when we were littler. There was something wrong with her I think but I don’t know what it was and I tried hard to be good all the time.”

Jon reached over and held Tommy’s hand. “You were very good, my man. It wasn’t your fault that she hit you sometimes.”

Renee cleared her throat and made a note on her pink legal pad.

Claire spoke up. “That’s right, Tommy. Your mother wasn’t feeling well a lot of the time, I think. You are a good friend and a very good big brother.” He smiled and leaned in to Jon. She turned to Renee. “I didn’t see him for a day or two. Then last night he came over to see if I had any food because his mom hadn’t come home yet and they were hungry.”

“And that’s when you called the police?” Claire
nodded.

Renee clicked the pen a few times, frowning. “What about you two?” she asked, looking from Adrian, who was now standing next to Claire, to Jon who was on the floor beside Tommy. “Are you Claire’s sons?”

Adrian raised his hand, chest level. “I’m Adrian. I’m her son. Jon is my husband.”

“Got it. Well, I’m glad you’re both here. The kids seem to have taken a shine to you.” Claire made a few more notes on her legal pad, then leaned toward the children. “Tommy, we have to

find a place for you to live because it's not safe to stay alone in your house anymore. Do you have any relatives that we can call? Grandparents? Aunts or Uncles?"

Tommy shook his head. "Mama said her parents were dead to her. I didn't know what that meant and she was always upset if I asked about them so I stopped asking." He scratched his elbow, thinking, then shook his head again.

"That's okay, Tommy. You know, I'm really impressed with how you went and got help yesterday. That was a very smart thing that you did. A very good thing."

He grinned and took Abby's hand. "I was just keeping us safe."

"Yes, you did exactly that. And you have some really nice neighbors here."

"I know!" Tommy smiled and his eyes lit up as he looked at Claire. She smiled back. A thought occurred to him. "Can we live with Miss Claire?"

Abby blinked rapidly on hearing this and shook her head fiercely. "I wanna live at *our* houth!" she said, kicking her feet and hitting Tommy in the shins.

"Ow! Stop that!" Tommy pushed away from Abby on the sofa and stood up, looking from Claire to Adrian to Renee to Jon. He turned back to Abby who was still kicking. "We can't live in our house any more. We just can't. Mama is gone and she isn't coming back, remember? There's no one to take care of us there."

Adrian settled himself on the sofa next to Abby and she curled into him, clutching onto his shirt. Tommy watched his sister attach herself to Adrian, then turned to Claire. "Can we, Miss Claire? Can we just live here with you?" He looked around the room. "It's a really nice house," he added hopefully.

Claire kneeled down next to him and hugged him for a moment. "Oh Tommy, I would love for you to live here, but I just can't take care of two children right now. Besides, Renee will tell you, it doesn't really work that way. They have foster homes."

The social worker interrupted. "We do have foster homes, and good ones too, but there aren't any spaces right now for a brother and a sister to move into together."

Claire's hand went to her throat. Adrian pulled Abby onto his lap and looked over at Jon, who was now sitting on the edge of his seat. The two men exchanged a look that spoke volumes. Jon raised his eyebrows. Adrian nodded slightly, then turned to Renee. "What about us?" he asked. Renee clicked her pen several times, thinking. "You'd want to foster these little guys?" She seemed surprised but not in a bad way.

"We recently decided to either adopt or hire a surrogate and have just begun the whole process. We've been talking about this ever since we met."

"How long have you been together?"

“We met our first year at UConn, so that’s thirteen years now.” Renee nodded thoughtfully.

Jon added, “We’ve been married for five years and before that we were just always together.”

“Except for that time in 2012 when we ‘took a break.’ Adrian wrinkled his nose and made air quotes.

“His idea, not mine.”

“Yeah, well, it didn’t last longer than a month, I don’t think,” Jon replied. “We just couldn’t stay apart that long.”

Claire tapped Renee on the knee. “Adrian is a pediatric nurse at Yale New Haven Hospital, and last year Jon published *Andromeda in Love*. Maybe you’ve heard of it? He’s writing the sequel now.” She beamed at the two young men.

Renee looked from one man to the other. “Hmmm . . . You would have to be interviewed by my boss, of course, and you know there is a ton of paperwork and vetting that has to be done. But it’s possible that it just might work. We have something in place for an emergency foster situation like this, and I think you’ll qualify.” She glanced at her watch. “Do you live here with Claire?”

“No, we live in Bayview,” Adrian replied. “It’s forty-five minutes away and we have a big house. They could each have their own room. And the schools are very good.”

Renee nodded, then turned to Tommy who was now sitting on the floor next to Claire. “Tommy, what do you think? How would you guys feel about staying with Adrian and Jon for a while?”

Abby clapped her hands and kissed Adrian on the cheek before Tommy had a chance to answer. “This one’s gonna break a lot of hearts,” Adrian said to Jon, and there was love woven through his voice. The adults smiled.

“Tommy?” This time Claire was asking. “I wouldn’t be able to take care of you as well as Adrian and Jonathan can. But I would visit a lot. And you could visit me here too.”

Tommy hesitated, then looked at Jon. “Do you have lilac flowers in your yard?”

“No, but we could go to the garden center right away and buy some. And you could help me plant them. Adrian and I are all about the lilacs too.”

“They were Mama’s favorite flower,” Tommy said slowly.

Jon and Adrian nodded.

Tommy looked at his sister who was still on Adrian’s lap. Then he put his hand in Jon’s, smiled, and looked directly at Renee. “In that case, I would feel very good about staying with Adrian and Jon.”

Chapter Thirteen

Tommy- One Year Later

I used to wish that I had a dad. Mama always said I didn't have one but then Marcos told me everybody *has* to have one. Well, now I have *two* dads and I know I really am lucky because there are lots of kids who don't even have *one* dad!

On that awful day when we found out Mama died, the lady named Renee made it so Abby and I could live at Jon and Adrian's house for a while so we would have a safe place to go because we couldn't live at our house anymore. *Obviously*. Back then we called them Jon and Adrian but now we just call them Daddy. And sometimes if they are both in the room and we want to say something to just one of them, we call them Daddy J and Daddy A.

It was hard moving again so soon but Grammie Claire helped us pack all of our things and she took care of things with the man who owned our house so we didn't have to worry about any of that. Back then we just called her Claire but now that our Daddies have officially adopted us, that means she is our grandmother because she is Daddy A's mama. We never had a grandmother before but we like it a whole, whole lot because we get to go to sleepovers at her house, and she always brings us presents every time she visits us which is a lot.

Our new house is amazing, and Daddy J did exactly what he said the very next day that we moved there. He drove Abby and me to the gardening store and we picked out three big lilac bushes, just like Grammie Claire's, and then we planted them in their back yard which is now our back yard too.

Mama is buried in a cemetery near the ocean which isn't far from where we live, and I think she would like that because it's so pretty. There aren't any lilacs there but we bring her a branch from one of our bushes whenever we can and we bring her other flowers when the lilacs are not in bloom which is actually most of the year.

Remember how I was confused about how Daddy J could be Daddy A's husband because they are both men? Well, I asked Grammie Claire about it the first time she came to visit us in Bayview and she explained that sometimes men and ladies fall in love and get married, but that sometimes men fall in love with men and get married too. Also ladies and ladies. I never knew that. "Love is love," she told me, "And it doesn't matter who loves who; what's important is that they stay loving each other."

I believe her, too. I can see that Daddy A and Daddy J love each other a whole lot. And I can see that they love Abby and me too. They spend a lot of time with us and they play with us and read us stories and make sure we do good in school. They give us good food to eat so we are never hungry. And they buy us nice clothes when we need them. When one of us has a nightmare, they both come and sit with me and rub my back until I fall asleep with them. I feel safe with Daddy A and Daddy J, and I know Abby does too. But it's more than that. I know they love us because

it's something about the way they look at us. Mama used to look at us that way when we were little. That's how I know that she always loved us.

Daddy A and Daddy J look at me like I'm special and like they think I'm important. If I ask a question, they always answer it and if they don't know the answer they tell me that, but then they find out the answer and let me know. Sometimes they say no when I want something but they never make me feel bad about it.

I don't have to worry about Abby anymore because I know that our Daddies are taking good care of her. It's their job to keep her safe now, not mine. She's in kindergarten and I'm in third grade. My teacher is Mrs. Cohen and I don't like her as much as I liked Miss Peterson but she's okay. Because I don't have to take care of Abby now, it means I can be on the soccer team after school. I never like sports before but Daddy J taught me about soccer and he played with me in the yard a lot, so I said if he would coach the team then I would play. That's why I'm on the team. And he is a good coach. Daddy A doesn't like soccer very much but he comes to all our games and he *is* a very good cheerer!

Daddy A takes me and Abby to the library and the bookstore a lot. Sometimes he takes us together and sometimes it's just me and him. I like picking out books with him. He told me that his daddy used to do that with him when he was a boy too. His daddy was named Caleb and even though he is dead I call him Grampie Caleb. I wish I had known him before he died.

Sometimes I go out and sit in our back yard near our lilac bushes and I think about Mama. I don't want to ever forget her. Daddy J says that's a good thing. Sometimes he sits with me there and he listens when I talk about her and he asks me questions to help me remember. One time I asked him what made Mama so sad and he told me that sometimes life gets to be too much for people and they don't know where to go for help. That makes sense I guess. That's why she slept a lot, because life felt too hard. That's why she couldn't take care of me and Abby like she used to. Daddy J told me that if I ever feel like life is getting to be too hard for me that I should tell him or Daddy A about it and that they will help me.

Daddy A is helping me to write my memories of Mama into a big book that we are calling Memories of Mama. Abby and I are drawing the pictures to go with the stories. She is much better at the pictures than I am but I can draw lilac flowers really good. There are going to be a lot of lilacs in our book. Grammie Claire was walking with me last week around our neighborhood and she told me that one thing she likes about lilacs is that she can smell their perfume long before she sees them, and that their fragrance (that's another word for perfume) lasts long after she's walked by them. I thought she was crazy at first, but on our walk that day, I found out that it's true! And maybe it's the same for Mama. Even though I can't see her any more, her memories will last for a very long time.

Chapter Fourteen

Claire- Also One Year Later

Last year on Mother's Day, Claire had been in no shape to celebrate even though Adrian and Jonathan had driven up and made her a nice lunch. Caleb had only been gone a month, and she was still struggling to find her way around her life without him.

Today when she wakes up, it is with a smile on her face and genuine anticipation in her heart. The boys will be here soon with Tommy and Abby, and they are all going to church together to celebrate. Claire has been teaching Sunday School again for a few months now, and once in a while she even assists Pastor Jamie with the children's choir. Today they are going to perform *All You Need is Love* at the 10 a.m. service.

Her phone rings as she pours her coffee. She hasn't changed the ringtone that Caleb fixed for her so many years ago when she first got the phone. *All You Need is Love* echoes through the kitchen and she chuckles to herself as she hums along with the tune. When she answers, it is Adrian wishing her a happy Mother's Day, and letting her know that they are on their way and will be there in less than an hour as long as no one needs to stop for a bathroom break. "Thank you dear," she says, adding a little sugar to her mug and stirring it in. "I can't wait to see you all," she adds, even though she was just in Bayview last weekend to stay with the kids while Adrian and Jon had a much-needed getaway in Maine.

Claire takes her coffee onto the back deck and gazes at her lilac bushes, breathing in their sweet intoxicating fragrance. Today she feels no need to sit beside the lilacs to tell them her sorrows. These days, she draws comfort from her family instead- Adrian, Jonathan, Tommy and Abby. She has grandchildren! She also has her best friend Libby, and her job at the library, Pastor Jamie, and her church family. Her life feels full again, although there will always be an ache in her heart when she remembers Caleb. How he would have loved Tommy and Abby, she thinks as she wanders back in the house and picks up the scrapbook that the children have been helping her make. They've been creating their own "Memories of Mama" book, with Adrian's help, and Tommy had the idea for her to make a "Memories of Caleb" book too. When she visits them, sometimes they work on their books together and Claire finds great comfort in sharing stories of Caleb with the children who now refer to him as Grampie Caleb.

She calls Libby to wish her a happy Mother's Day and they make plans to get together for supper and a movie the next day.

When her family arrives, Tommy is the first to rush to her and throw his arms around her. But first, he hands her a big, bright, beautiful bouquet of lilacs. "I know you already have them in your yard, Grammie Claire, but we saw these in the grocery store this morning and Daddy A let me get them for you. So now you can have the lilac flowers *in* your house and not just *outside!*" Claire is delighted and thanks him. She gives him a big hug as soon as she sets the flowers down

on the kitchen table. Then Abby joins him, and the boys, and it's one big hugfest. She is remembering back to last May when she first met Tommy. He seems a different child now: a head taller, longer hair, no dark circles under his eyes, clean clothes, no anxiety marking his face. How perfectly things worked out, she thinks, for all of them. Adrian and Jon got their family. Tommy and Abby got the family that they so dearly deserved. And for herself? Claire supposed that she'd gotten love . . . Love and lilacs. What more did she need, really?

Later, at church, the five of them squeeze into one of the front pews together. Tommy waves excitedly to Pastor Jamie when he appears on the altar to lead the service. Jamie grins at all of them and waves back. When it's time for the children's choir to sing, Tommy and Abby run to the altar to join the other kids and they sing out the words that Claire taught them, as loud as they can.

*There's nothing you can know that isn't known
Nothing you can see that isn't shown
There's nowhere you can be that isn't where you're meant to be
It's easy . . .*

*All you need is love
All you need is love
All you need is love, love
Love is all you need.*

Thank you for reading my new novella,
All You Need is Love and Lilacs!

If you'd like to give me feedback, please send to
annemarie@annemariebennett.com

If you'd like to be on my email list
for monthly updates on my 9/22/20 release
Dragonflies at Night: More Than a Love Story,
please sign up here:
[AnneMarieBennett.com/newsletter](https://www.AnnMarieBennett.com/newsletter)

And I'd most especially love it
if you'd leave a review for *Love & Lilacs* on Amazon or Goodreads:
Amazon review here: **<https://amzn.to/3dPeQE0>**
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