



Sweet Forgiveness: A Novel

By Lori Nelson Spielman

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#1 international bestselling author Lori Nelson Spielman follows *The Life List* with *Sweet Forgiveness*, in which a woman's receipt of two "forgiveness stones" sends her searching for atonement

The Forgiveness Stones craze is sweeping the nation—instantly recognizable pouches of stones that come with a chain letter and two simple requests: to forgive, and then to seek forgiveness. But New Orleans' favorite talk show host, Hannah Farr, isn't biting. Intensely private and dating the city's mayor, Hannah has kept her very own pouch of Forgiveness Stones hidden for two years—and her dark past concealed for nearly two decades. But when Fiona Knowles, creator of the Forgiveness Stones, appears on Hannah's show, Hannah unwittingly reveals on air details of a decades-old falling out with her mother.

Spurned by her fans, doubted by her friends, and accused by her boyfriend of marring his political career, Hannah reluctantly embarks on a public journey of forgiveness. As events from her past become clearer, the truth she's clung to since her teenage years has never felt murkier. Hannah must find the courage to right old wrongs, or risk losing her mother, and any glimmer of an authentic life, forever.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Spielman spins an effervescent tale in which betrayals fizzle out into human weaknesses and grudges dissolve into mercy. Bright prose, a plucky heroine, and more than a few plot twists make for a delightful, light read.”—***Kirkus Reviews***

“Spielman’s heroine is both likable and relatable, and the power of confession, forgiveness, and love shines all the way through this touching novel.”—***Library Journal***

“*Sweet Forgiveness* will make you rethink everything you know about forgiveness and love.”—**Amy Sue Nathan, author of *The Glass Wives***

“Delivers living, breathing characters and a page-turning plot that forces us to admit that the histories we have constructed for ourselves may be more fiction than fact, and the role we actually played may be less victim than villain.”—**Julie Lawson Timmer, author of *Five Days Left***

About the Author

Lori Nelson Spielman lives in Michigan with her husband. *Sweet Forgiveness* is her second novel. She is currently on leave from her teaching job while she works on her third. www.LoriNelsonSpielman.com

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Matthew Dae Smith

Chapter 1

It went on for one hundred sixty-three days. I looked back at my diary years later and counted. And now she’s written a book. Unbelievable. The woman’s a rising star. An expert on forgiveness, how ironic. I study her picture. She’s still cute, with a pixie haircut and a button nose. But her smile looks genuine now, her eyes no longer mocking. Even so, her very image makes my heart race.

I fling the newspaper onto my coffee table and instantly snatch it up again.

CLAIM YOUR SHAME

By Brian Moss | The Times-Picayune

NEW ORLEANS—Can an apology heal old wounds, or are some secrets better left unsaid?

According to Fiona Knowles, a 34-year-old attorney from Royal Oak, Michigan, making amends for past grievances is a crucial step toward achieving inner peace.

“It takes courage to claim our shame,” Knowles said. “Most of us aren’t comfortable demonstrating vulnerability. Instead, we stuff our guilt inside, hoping no one will ever see what’s hidden within. Releasing

our shame frees us.”

And Ms. Knowles should know. She put her theory to the test in the spring of 2013, when she penned 35 letters of apology. With each letter, she enclosed a pouch containing two stones, which she dubbed the Forgiveness Stones. The recipient was given two simple requests: to forgive and to seek forgiveness.

“I realized people were desperate for an excuse—an obligation—to atone,” Knowles said. “Like the seeds of a dandelion, the Forgiveness Stones caught the wind and migrated.”

Whether the result of the wind or Ms. Knowles’ savvy use of social media, it’s clear the Forgiveness Stones have hit their mark. To date, it’s estimated that nearly 400,000 forgiveness stones are in circulation.

Ms. Knowles will appear at Octavia Books Thursday, April 24, to talk about her new book, appropriately titled **THE FORGIVENESS STONES**.

I jump when my cell phone buzzes, telling me it’s four forty-five—time to go to work. My hands shake as I tuck the paper into my tote. I grab my keys and to-go mug, and head out the door.

Three hours later, after reviewing last week’s abysmal ratings and being briefed on today’s riveting topic—how to apply self-tanner properly—I sit in my office/dressing room, Velcro curlers in my hair and a plastic cape covering my dress du jour. It’s my least favorite part of the day. After ten years of being on camera, you’d think I’d be used to it. But getting made up requires that I arrive unmade, which for me is akin to trying on bathing suits under fluorescent lights with a spectator present. I used to apologize to Jade for having to witness the potholes, otherwise known as pores, on my nose, or the under-eye circles that make me look like I’m ready to play football. I once tried wrestling the foundation brush from her clutches, hoping to spare her the horrifying and impossible task of trying to camouflage a zit the size of Mauna Loa on my chin. As my father used to say, if God wanted a woman’s face to be naked, he wouldn’t have created mascara.

While Jade performs her magic, I shuffle through a stack of mail and freeze when I see it. My stomach sinks. It’s buried mid-stack, with just the upper right corner visible. It tortures me, that big round Chicago postmark. *C’mon, Jack, enough already!* It’s been over a year since he last contacted me. How many times do I have to tell him it’s okay, he’s forgiven, I’ve moved on? I drop the stack on the ledge in front of me, arranging the letters so that the postmark is no longer visible, and flip open my laptop.

“*Dear Hannah,*” I read aloud from my e-mail, trying to push aside all thoughts of Jack Rousseau. “*My husband and I watch your show every morning. He thinks you’re terrific, says you’re the next Katie Couric.*”

“Look up, Ms. Couric,” Jade orders, and smudges my lower lashes with a chalk pencil.

“Uh-huh. Katie Couric minus the millions of dollars and gazillions of fans.” . . . And the gorgeous daughters and perfect new husband . . .

“You’ll get there,” Jade says with such certainty I almost believe her. She looks especially pretty today, with her dreadlocks pulled into a wild and wiry ponytail, accenting her dark eyes and flawless brown skin. She’s wearing her usual leggings and black smock, each pocket stuffed with brushes and pencils of various widths and angles.

She blends the liner with a flat-tipped brush, and I resume reading. “*Personally, I think Katie is overrated. My favorite is Hoda Kotb. Now that girl is funny.*”

“Ouch!” Jade says. “You just got slammed.”

I laugh and continue reading. “*My husband says you’re divorced. I say you’ve never been married. Who’s right?*”

I position my fingers on the keyboard.

“*Dear Ms. Nixon,*” I say as I type. “*Thank you so much for watching The Hannah Farr Show. I hope you and your husband enjoy the new season. (And by the way, I agree . . . Hoda is hilarious.) Wishing you the best, Hannah.*”

“Hey, you didn’t answer her question.”

I shoot Jade a look in the mirror. She shakes her head and grabs a palette of eye shadow. “Of course you didn’t.”

“I was nice.”

“You always are. Too nice, if you ask me.”

“Yeah, right. Like when I’m complaining about that snooty chef on last week’s show—Mason What’s-His-Name—who answered every question with a one-word reply? Nice when I’m obsessing about ratings? And now, oh, God, now Claudia.” I turn to look at Jade. “Did I tell you Stuart’s thinking of making her my cohost? I’m history!”

“Close your eyes,” she tells me, and brushes shadow over my lids.

“The woman’s been in town all of six weeks, and already she’s more popular than I am.”

“Not a chance,” Jade says. “This city has adopted you as one of their own. But that’s not going to stop Claudia Campbell from attempting a takeover. I get a bad vibe from that one.”

“I don’t see it,” I say. “She’s ambitious, all right, but she seems really nice. It’s Stuart I’m worried about. With him it’s all about ratings, and lately mine have been—”

“Shit. I know. But they’ll rise again. I’m just saying, you need to watch your back. Miss Claudia’s used to being top dog. There’s no way the rising star from WNBC New York is going to settle for some rinky-dink spot as the morning anchor.”

There’s a pecking order in broadcast journalism. Most of us start our careers by doing live shots for the five a.m. news, which means waking at three for an audience of two. After only nine months of that grueling schedule, I was lucky enough to advance to the weekend anchor, and soon after, the noon news, a spot I enjoyed for four years. Of course, anchoring the evening news is the grand prize, and I happened to be with station WNO at just the right time. Robert Jacobs retired, or, as rumor had it, was forced to retire, and Priscille offered me the position. Ratings soared. Soon I was booked day and night, hosting charity events throughout the city, playing the master of ceremonies at fund-raisers and Mardi Gras celebrations. To my surprise, I became a local celebrity, something I still can’t wrap my head around. And my rapid rise didn’t stop with evening anchor. Because the Crescent City “fell in love with Hannah Farr,” or so I was told, two years ago I was offered my own show—an opportunity most journalists would kill for.

“Um, I hate to break it to you, sunshine, but *The Hannah Farr Show* ain’t exactly the big leagues.”

Jade shrugs. “Best TV in Louisiana, if you ask me. Claudia’s licking her chops, mark my words. If she’s got to be here, there’s only one job she’s going to settle for, and that’s yours.” Jade’s phone chirps and she peers

at the caller ID. “Mind if I take this?”

“Go ahead,” I say, welcoming the interruption. I don’t want to talk about Claudia, the striking blonde who, at twenty-four, is a full—and crucial—decade younger than I am. Why does her fiancé have to live in New Orleans, of all places? Looks, talent, youth, *and* a fiancé! She’s one-upped me in every single category, including relationship status.

Jade’s voice grows louder. “Are you serious?” she says to the caller. “Dad’s got an appointment at West Jefferson Medical. I reminded you yesterday.”

My stomach turns. It’s her soon-to-be ex, Marcus, the father of her twelve-year-old son—or Officer Asshole, as she now calls him.

I close my laptop and grab the stack of mail from the counter, hoping to give Jade the illusion of privacy. I thumb through the pile, searching for the Chicago postmark. I’ll read Jack’s apology, and then I’ll compose a response, reminding him that I’m happy now, that he needs to get on with his life. The thought makes me weary.

I land on the envelope and pull it loose. Instead of Jackson Rousseau’s address in the upper left-hand corner, it reads, *WCHI News*.

So it’s not from Jack. That’s a relief.

Dear Hannah,

It was a pleasure meeting you last month in Dallas. Your speech at the NAB Conference was both captivating and inspiring.

As I mentioned to you then, WCHI is creating a new morning talk show, Good Morning, Chicago. Like The Hannah Farr Show, GMC’s target audience will be women. Along with the occasional fun and frivolous segments, GMC will tackle some weighty topics, including politics, literature and the arts, and world affairs.

We are searching for a host and would very much like to discuss the position with you. Would you be interested? In addition to the interview process and a demo tape, we ask that you provide a proposal for an original show.

Sincerely yours,

*James Peters
Senior Vice President,
WCHI Chicago*

Wow. So he was serious when he pulled me aside at the National Association of Broadcasters Conference. He’d seen my show. He knew my ratings were down, but he told me I had great potential, given the right opportunity. Maybe this was the opportunity he was alluding to. And how refreshing that WCHI wants to hear my idea for a rundown. Stuart rarely considers my input. “There are four topics people want to watch on morning television,” Stuart claims. “Celebrities, sex, weight loss, and beauty.” What I wouldn’t give to host a show with some controversy.

My head swells for all of two seconds. Then I come back to reality. I don’t want a job in Chicago, a city nine hundred miles away. I’m too invested in New Orleans. I love this dichotomous city, the gentility mixed with grit, with its jazz and po’boys and crawfish gumbo. And more important, I’m in love with the city’s mayor.

Even if I wanted to apply—which I don’t—Michael wouldn’t hear of it. He is third-generation “N’awlins,” now raising the fourth generation—his daughter, Abby. Still, it’s nice to feel wanted.

Jade punches off the phone, the vein in her forehead bulging. “That jackass! My dad cannot miss this appointment. Marcus insisted he’d take him—he’s been sucking up again. ‘No problem,’ he told me last week. ‘I’ll swing by on my way to the station.’ I should have known.” In the mirror’s reflection, her dark eyes glisten. She turns away and punches numbers into her phone. “Maybe Natalie can break away.”

Jade’s sister is a high school principal. There’s no way she can break away. “What time is the appointment?”

“Nine o’clock. Marcus claims he’s tied up. Yeah, he’s tied up, all right. Tied to his ho’s bedpost, doing his morning cardio.”

I check my watch: 8:20. “Go,” I say. “Doctors are never on schedule. If you hurry, you can still make it.”

She scowls at me. “I can’t leave. I haven’t finished your makeup.”

I hop from my chair. “What? You think I’ve forgotten how to apply makeup?” I shoo her away. “Go. Now.”

“But Stuart. If he finds out . . .”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got you covered. Just be back in time to get Sheri ready for the evening news or we’ll both catch hell.” I point her petite frame toward the hallway. “Now get going.”

Her eyes dart to the clock above the door. She stands silent, biting her lip. Suddenly it occurs to me: Jade took the streetcar to work. I grab my tote from the locker and fish out my keys. “Take my car,” I say, extending the keys.

“What? No. I can’t do that! What if I—”

“It’s a car, Jade. It’s replaceable.” *Unlike your father*, but I don’t say this. I tuck the keys into her palm. “Now get out of here before Stuart comes along and finds out you skipped out on me.”

Her face floods with relief and she captures me in a hug. “Oh, thank you. Don’t you worry, I’ll take good care of your ride.” She turns to the door. “Stay in trouble,” she says, her favorite parting line. She’s halfway to the elevator when I hear her call, “I owe you one, Hannabelle.”

“And don’t think I’m going to forget it. Give Pop a hug for me.”

I close the door, alone in my dressing room with thirty minutes to spare until preshow. I find a compact of bronzer and brush it over my forehead and across the bridge of my nose.

I free the snaps of my plastic cape and pick up the letter, rereading Mr. Peters’s words as I meander past the sofa and over to my desk. There’s no question the job’s a fantastic opportunity, especially given my current slump here. I’d be moving from the fifty-third to the third largest television market in the country. Within a few years, I’d be a competitor for nationally syndicated programs like *GMA* or the *Today* show. No doubt my salary would quadruple.

I sit down behind my desk. Obviously, Mr. Peters sees the same Hannah Farr everyone else sees: a happily single career woman with no roots, an opportunist who’d gladly pack up and move across the country for a better salary and bigger assignment.

My gaze lands on a photo of my father and me, taken at the Critics' Choice Awards in 2012. I bite my cheek, remembering the swanky event. My dad's glassy eyes and ruddy nose tell me he's already had too much to drink. I'm wearing a silver ball gown and a huge grin. But my eyes look vacant and hollow, the same way I felt that night, sitting alone with my father. It wasn't because I'd lost the award. It was because I *felt* lost. Spouses and children and parents who weren't drunk surrounded the other recipients. They laughed and cheered, and later danced together in big circles. I wanted what they had.

I lift another picture, this one of Michael and me, sailing on Lake Pontchartrain last summer. A shock of Abby's blond hair is visible at the frame's edge. She's perched on the bow to my right, her back to me.

I set the photo back on my desk. In a couple of years I hope to have a different picture on my desk, this one of Michael and me standing in front of a pretty home, along with a smiling Abby, and maybe even a child of our own.

I tuck Mr. Peters's letter into a private file marked INTEREST, where I've stashed the dozen or so similar letters I've received over the years. Tonight I'll send the usual thanks-but-no-thanks note. Michael doesn't need to know. For, as cliché and terribly outdated as it sounds, a high-profile job in Chicago is nothing compared to being part of a family.

But when will I get that family? Early on, Michael and I seemed completely in sync. Within weeks we were speaking in future tense. We spent hours sharing our dreams. We'd toss out possible names for our children—Zachary or Emma or Liam—speculate on what they'd look like and whether Abby would prefer a brother or a sister. We'd scour the Internet for houses, sending links back and forth with notes like, *Cute, but Zachary will need a bigger backyard, or Imagine what we could do in a bedroom this size.* All that seems like ages ago. Now Michael's dreams are focused on his political career, and any talk of our future has been tabled for "once Abby graduates."

A thought occurs to me. Could the prospect of losing me trigger the commitment from Michael I've been hoping for?

I pull the letter from the file, my idea gaining momentum. This is more than a job opportunity. It's an opportunity to speed things along. Abby's graduation is only a year away now. It's time we start making a plan. I reach for my cell phone, feeling lighter than I have in weeks.

I punch in his number, wondering if I'll get lucky and catch him in a rare moment of solitude. He'll be impressed that I'm being courted for a job—especially in a big market like Chicago. He'll tell me how proud he is, and then he'll remind me of all the wonderful reasons I can't leave, the most important reason being him. And later, when he's a chance to reflect, he'll realize that he'd better seal the deal, before I'm snatched from his clutches. I smile, giddy with the thought of being sought-after both professionally and personally.

"Mayor Payne." His voice is already heavy, and his day has just begun.

"Happy Wednesday," I say, hoping the reminder of our date night might cheer him. Last December Abby started babysitting every Wednesday evening, relieving Michael of his parental duties and allowing us one weeknight together.

"Hey, babe." He sighs. "What a crazy day. There's a community forum at Warren Easton High. Brainstorming session on school violence prevention. I'm on my way over there now. I hope to be back by noon for the rally. You're coming, right?"

He's talking about the Into the Light Rally, to spread awareness about child sexual abuse. I lean my elbows

on the desk. "I told Marisa I wouldn't be at this one. Noon is cutting it too close. I feel awful."

"Don't. You give them plenty. I can only make a quick appearance myself. I've got meetings all afternoon to discuss the escalation in poverty. They'll run through the dinner hour, I suspect. Would you mind if we take the night off?"

Poverty issues? I can't argue with that, even if it is Wednesday. If I hope to become the mayor's wife, I'd better learn to accept that he is a man of service. After all, it is one of the things I love most about him. "No. It's okay. But you sound exhausted. Try to get some sleep tonight."

"I will." He lowers his voice. "Though I'd prefer to get something other than sleep."

I smile, imagining myself wrapped in Michael's arms. "Me, too."

Should I tell him about the letter from James Peters? He's got enough to worry about, without me adding a threat.

"I'll let you go," he says. "Unless there was something you needed."

Yes, I want to tell him, I do need something. I need to know that you'll miss me tonight, that I am a priority. I need assurance that we're heading toward a future together, that you want to marry me. I take a deep breath.

"I just wanted to give you a heads-up. Someone's after your girlfriend." I say it with a lighthearted, singsong voice. "I got a love letter in the mail today."

"Who's my competition?" he says. "I'll kill him, I swear."

I laugh and explain the letter from James Peters and the job prospect, hoping to convey just enough enthusiasm to sound a little warning bell in Michael.

"It's not exactly a job offer, but it sounds like they're interested in me. They want a proposal for an original story idea. Kind of cool, right?"

"Very cool. Congratulations, superstar. Another reminder that you're completely out of my league."

My heart does a little jig. "Thanks. It felt good." I squeeze shut my eyes and plow on, before I lose my nerve. "The show premieres in the fall. They need to move quickly."

"That's only six months away. Better get a move on. Have you scheduled the interview?"

The wind is knocked from me. I put a hand to my throat and force myself to breathe. Thank God Michael can't see me.

"I . . . no, I—I haven't responded yet."

"If we can swing it, Abby and I'll come with you. Make a mini-vacation of it. I haven't been to Chicago in years."

Say something! Tell him you're disappointed, that you were hoping he'd beg you to stay. Remind him that your ex-fiancé lives in Chicago, for God's sake!

"So, you wouldn't mind if I left?"

“Well, I wouldn’t like it. Long-distance would be a bitch. But we could make it work, don’t you think?”

“Sure,” I say. But inside I’m thinking of our current schedules, where even in the same city we can’t seem to carve any alone time.

“Listen,” he says, “I’ve got to run. I’ll call you later. And congratulations, babe. I’m proud of you.”

I punch off the phone and slump into my chair. Michael doesn’t care if I leave. I’m an idiot. Marriage is no longer on his radar. And he’s left me no choice now. I have to send Mr. Peters my résumé and an episode proposal. Otherwise it’ll look like I was being manipulative, which, I suppose, I was.

My eyes land on the *Times-Picayune*, peeking from my tote. I lift the paper and scowl at the headline. CLAIM YOUR SHAME. Yeah, right. Send a Forgiveness Stone and everything will be forgiven. You’re delusional, Fiona Knowles.

I knead my forehead. I could sabotage this job offer, write a crummy proposal and tell Michael I didn’t get the interview. No. I have too much pride. If Michael wants me to pursue the job, dammit, I will! And not just pursue it, I’ll get the offer. I’ll move away and start fresh. The show will be wildly popular and I’ll be Chicago’s next Oprah Winfrey! I’ll meet someone new, someone who loves kids and is ready to commit. How do you like me now, Michael Payne?

But first I need to write the proposal.

I pace the room, trying to drum up an idea for a killer rundown, something thought-provoking and fresh and timely. Something that would land me the job and impress Michael . . . and maybe even make him reconsider.

My eyes return again to the newspaper. Slowly, my scowl softens. Yes. It might work. But could I do it?

I pull the newspaper from my tote and carefully tear out Fiona’s article. I move to my desk drawer and suck in a deep breath. *What the hell am I doing?* I stare at the closed drawer as if it’s Pandora’s box. Finally, I yank it open.

I fumble past pens and paper clips and Post-it notes until I spot it. It’s tucked in the very back corner of the drawer, just where I’d hidden it two years ago.

A letter of apology from Fiona Knowles. And a velvet pouch containing a pair of Forgiveness Stones.

Chapter 2

I draw open the pouch strings. Two small, round ordinary garden pebbles tumble onto my palm. I run my finger over them, one gray with black veins, the other ivory. I feel a crinkle within the velvet fabric and pull out the accordion-pleated note, like a fortune in a cookie.

One stone signifies the weight of anger.

The other stone symbolizes the weight of shame.

Both can be lifted, if you choose to rid yourself of their burdens.

Is she still waiting for my stone? Have the other thirty-four she sent been returned to her? Guilt chokes me.

I unfold the cream-colored piece of stationery and reread the letter.

Dear Hannah,

My name is Fiona Knowles. I sincerely hope you haven't a clue who I am. If you remember me, it's because I left a scar on you.

You and I were in middle school together at Bloomfield Hills Academy. You were new to the school, and I chose you as my target. Not only did I torment you, but I turned the other girls against you, too. And once, I almost got you suspended. I told Mrs. Maples I saw you take the history exam answer key from her desk, when in fact, I'd taken it.

To say I am ashamed does not begin to convey my guilt. As an adult, I've tried to rationalize my childish cruelty—jealousy being the top contender, insecurity the second. But the truth is, I was a bully. I make no excuse. I am truly and desperately sorry.

I am so pleased to discover that you're a huge success now, that you have your own talk show in New Orleans. Perhaps you've long forgotten about Bloomfield Hills Academy and the rotten person I was. But my actions haunt me every day.

I am an attorney by day, a poet by night. Every now and then I'm even lucky enough to have a piece published. I am not married, and I have no children. Sometimes I think loneliness is my penance.

I'm asking that you send one stone back to me, if and when you accept my apology, lifting both the burden of your anger and the burden of my shame. Please offer the other pebble and an additional stone to someone you have hurt, along with a heartfelt apology. When that stone comes back to you, as I hope mine will come back to me, you will have completed the Circle of Forgiveness. Throw your stone into a lake or a stream, bury it in your garden, or settle it into your flower bed—anything that symbolizes that you are finally free from your shame.

Sincerely yours,

Fiona Knowles

I set the letter down. Even now, two years after it first landed in my mailbox, my breath comes in short bursts. So much collateral damage came from that girl's actions. Because of Fiona Knowles, my family disintegrated. Yes, if it hadn't been for Fiona, my parents may never have divorced.

I rub my temples. I need to be practical, not emotional. Fiona Knowles is all the buzz now, and I'm one of her original recipients. What a story I have, right here in front of me. Exactly the kind of idea that would impress Mr. Peters and the others at WCHI. I could propose we bring Fiona on the air, and the two of us could tell our story of guilt and shame and forgiveness.

Only problem is, I haven't forgiven her. And I wasn't intending to. I bite my lip. Do I need to now? Or, is it possible I can finesse this? After all, WCHI is only asking for the idea. The show would never be filmed. But no, I'd better be thorough, just in case.

I pull a sheet of stationery from my desk, then hear a tap on the door.

“Ten minutes till showtime,” Stuart says.

“Be right there.”

I grab my lucky fountain pen, a gift from Michael when my show took second place in the Louisiana Broadcast Awards, and scribble my reply.

Dear Fiona,

Enclosed you'll find your stone, signifying the lifted weight of your shame and the loss of my anger.

Sincerely,

Hannah Farr

Yes, it's halfhearted. But it's the best I can do. I slip the letter and one of the stones into an envelope and seal it. I'll drop it in the mailbox on my way home. Now I can honestly say I returned the stone.

Chapter 3

I change from my dress and heels into a pair of leggings and flats. With my tote stuffed with fresh-baked bread and a bouquet of puffy white magnolia blossoms, I walk toward the Garden District to visit my friend Dorothy Rousseau. Dorothy lived next door to me at the Evangeline, a six-story condominium building on St. Charles Avenue, before she moved to the Garden Home four months ago.

I dash across Jefferson Street, passing gardens brimming with white foxglove, orange hibiscus, and ruby-red canna flowers. But even amid the beauty of springtime, my mind flits from Michael and his complete nonchalance, to the job prospect that now seems mandatory, to Fiona Knowles and the stone of forgiveness I just sent.

It's after three o'clock when I arrive at the old brick mansion. I walk up the metal ramp and greet Martha and Joan sitting on the front porch.

“Hey, ladies,” I say, and offer them each a magnolia stem.

Dorothy moved into the Garden Home when macular degeneration finally robbed her of her independence. With her only son nine hundred miles away, I was the one who helped her find her new place, a place where meals were served three times a day and help could be summoned with the touch of a buzzer. At seventy-six, Dorothy weathered the move like a freshman arriving on campus.

I step into the grand foyer and bypass the guest book. I'm a regular here, so everybody knows me now. I make my way to the back of the house and find Dorothy alone in the courtyard. She's slumped in a wicker chair, a pair of old-fashioned headphones covering her ears. Her chin rests on her chest, and her eyes are closed. I tap her shoulder and she starts.

“Hi, Dorothy, it's me.”

She removes the headphones, clicks off her CD player, and rises. She's tall and slim, with a sleek white bob that contrasts with her pretty olive skin. Despite her inability to see, she applies makeup every day—to spare those with vision, she jokes. But with or without makeup, Dorothy is one of the most beautiful women I know.

“Hannah, dear!” Her southern drawl is smooth and lingering, like the taste of caramel. She gropes for my arm, and when she finds it, she pulls me into a hug. The familiar pang lodges in my chest. I breathe in the scent of her Chanel perfume and feel her hand rub circles on my back. It’s the touch, one I never tire of, of a daughterless mother, to a motherless daughter.

She sniffs the air. “Do I smell magnolias?”

“What a nose,” I say, and remove the bouquet from my tote. “I’ve also brought a loaf of my cinnamon maple bread.”

She claps her hands. “My favorite! You spoil me, Hannah Marie.”

I smile. Hannah Marie—a phrase a mother would use, I imagine.

She cocks her head. “What brings you here on a Wednesday? Don’t you have to get gussied up for your date?”

“Michael’s busy tonight.”

“Is he? Sit down and tell me your story.”

I smile at her signature invitation to settle in for a visit and plop down on the ottoman so that I’m facing her. She reaches out and places a hand on my arm. “Talk to me.”

What a gift, having a friend who knows when I need to vent. I tell her about the e-mail from James Peters at WCHI, and Michael’s enthusiastic response.

“‘Never make someone a priority when all you are to them is an option.’ Maya Angelou said that.” She lifts her shoulders. “Of course, you just tell me to mind my own beeswax.”

“No, I hear you. I feel like a fool. I’ve wasted two years thinking he was the one I’d marry. But I’m not the least bit convinced it’s even on his radar.”

“You know,” Dorothy says, “I learned a long time ago to ask for what I want. It’s not very romantic, but honestly, men can be such blockheads when you attempt innuendo. Have you told him you were disappointed in his reaction?”

I shake my head. “No. I was trapped, so I fired off an e-mail to Mr. Peters, letting him know I was interested. What choice did I have?”

“You have complete choice, Hannah. Don’t ever forget that. Having options is our greatest power.”

“Right. I could tell Michael I’m ditching the job of a lifetime because I am holding on to the hope that someday we’ll be a family. Yup. That option would give me some power, all right. The power to send Michael running for the hills.”

As if she’s trying to lighten the mood, Dorothy leans in. “Are you proud of me? I haven’t even mentioned my dear son.”

I laugh. “Until now.”

“All the more reason Michael is playing it cool. He must be terribly distraught about the idea of you moving

to the same city as your ex-fiancé.”

I shrug. “Well, if he is, I wouldn’t know it. He never even mentioned Jack.”

“Will you see him?”

“Jack? No. No, of course not.” I grab the pouch of stones, suddenly anxious for a change of subject. It’s too awkward to talk about my cheating ex-fiancé with his mother.

“I’ve brought you something else, too.” I place the velvet pouch in her hands. “These are called the Forgiveness Stones. Have you heard of them?”

She brightens. “Of course. Fiona Knowles began this phenomenon. She was on NPR last week. Did you know she’s written a book? She’s going to be here in New Orleans sometime in April.”

“Yes, I heard. I actually went to middle school with Fiona Knowles.”

“You don’t say!”

I tell Dorothy about the stones I received and Fiona’s apology.

“My goodness! You were one of her original thirty-five. You never told me.”

I gaze across the grounds. Mr. Wiltshire sits in his wheelchair under the shade of a live oak tree, while Lizzy, Dorothy’s favorite aide, reads him poetry. “I didn’t plan to reply. I mean, does a Forgiveness Stone really make up for two years of bullying?”

Dorothy sits quietly, and I’m guessing she thinks it does.

“Anyway, I have to write a proposal for WCHI. I’m choosing Fiona’s story. She’s a hot topic right now, and the fact that I was one of the original recipients gives it a personal angle. It’s the perfect human-interest story.”

Dorothy nods. “Which is why you returned her stone.”

I look down at my hands. “Yes. I admit it. I had ulterior motives.”

“This proposal,” Dorothy says. “Will they actually produce the show?”

“No, I don’t think so. It’s more of a test of my creativity. Still, I want to impress them. And if I don’t get the job, I might be able to use the idea for my show here, if Stuart would let me.”

“So, according to Fiona’s rules, I’m supposed to continue the circle by adding a second stone to the pouch and sending it on to someone I’ve hurt.” I remove the ivory stone I received from Fiona and leave the second pebble in the velvet pouch. “And that’s what I’m doing now, with this stone and my sincere apology to you.”

“Me? Whatever for?”

“Yes, you.” I tuck the stone into her hand. “I know how much you loved living at the Evangeline. I’m sorry I couldn’t have cared for you better, allowed you to stay. Maybe we could have hired an aide for you . . .”

“Don’t be ridiculous, dear. That condo was much too small to have another person underfoot. This place

suits me fine. I'm happy here. You know that."

"Still, I want you to have this Forgiveness Stone."

She lifts her chin, and her unseeing gaze falls on me like a spotlight. "That's a cop-out. You're looking for a quick way to continue this circle so you can outline your episode for WCHI. What are you proposing? Fiona Knowles and I come on the set, creating the perfect Circle of Forgiveness?"

I turn to her, stung. "Is that so bad?"

"It is when you've chosen the wrong person." She gropes for my hand and plunks the stone back onto my palm. "I cannot accept this stone. There's someone much more deserving of your apology."

Jack's confession crashes down on me, splintering into a million jagged pieces. *I'm sorry, Hannah. I slept with Amy. Just once. It'll never happen again. I swear to you.*

I close my eyes. "Please, Dorothy. I know you think I ruined your son's life when I broke off our engagement. But we can't keep rehashing the past."

"I'm not talking about Jackson," she says, each word deliberate. "I am talking about your mother."

Chapter 4

I fling the stone onto her lap as if its mere touch burned. "No. It's too late for forgiveness. Some things are better left alone."

And if my father were alive, he'd agree. "'You can't mow a field once it's been plowed,'" he used to say. "'Unless you want to get stuck in the mud.'"

She takes a deep breath. "I've known you since you first moved here, Hannah, a girl with big dreams and a big heart. I learned all about your wonderful father, how he raised you single-handedly, since you were a teen. But you've shared very little about your mother, except to say she chose her boyfriend over you."

"And I want nothing to do with her." My heart speeds. It angers me that the woman I haven't seen or spoken to in over a decade still wields such power over me. *The weight of anger*, I imagine Fiona would say. "My mother made her choice clear."

"Perhaps. But I've always thought there was more to the story." She looks away and shakes her head. "I'm sorry. I should have shared my thoughts years ago. It has always bothered me. I wonder if I wasn't trying to keep you all to myself." She casts about for my hand and places the stone in my palm again. "You need to make peace with your mother, Hannah. It's time."

"You've got it backwards. I've forgiven Fiona Knowles. This second stone is meant to seek forgiveness, not grant it."

Dorothy raises her shoulders. "Grant forgiveness or seek it. I don't think there's a hard-and-fast rule for these Forgiveness Stones. The object is to restore harmony, yes?"

"Look, I'm sorry, Dorothy, but you don't know the whole story."

“I wonder whether you do, either,” she says.

I stare at her. “Why would you say that?”

“Remember the last time your father was here? I was still living in the Evangeline, and y’all came for dinner?”

It was my dad’s final visit, though we’d never have guessed it then. He was tan and happy and the center of attention, as always. We sat on Dorothy’s balcony, swapping stories and getting tipsy.

“Yes, I remember.”

“I believe he knew he’d be leaving this world.”

Her tone, along with the almost mystical look in her clouded eyes, makes the hairs on my arms rise.

“Your father and I had a private moment. He shared something with me while you and Michael ran out for another bottle of wine. He’d had a bit too much to drink, I’ll grant him that. But I believe he wanted to get this off his chest.”

My heart pounds. “What did he say?”

“He told me that your mother still sent you letters.”

I work to breathe. Letters? From my mother? “No. It was definitely the alcohol talking. She hasn’t sent a letter in almost twenty years.”

“Can you be sure? I got the distinct impression your mother has been trying to reach you for years.”

“He would have told me. No. My mom wants nothing to do with me.”

“But you’ve said it yourself, you were the one who severed contact.”

A snapshot of my sixteenth birthday comes into view. My father sat across from me at Mary Mac’s Restaurant. I can see his grin, wide and guileless, and picture his elbows on the white tablecloth when he leaned in to watch me unwrap my gift—a diamond-and-sapphire pendant much too extravagant for a teen. “Those stones are from Suzanne’s ring,” he said. “I had it reset for you.”

I stared at the gigantic gems, remembering his big paws rifling through my mom’s jewelry box the day he left, his claim that the ring was rightfully his—and mine.

“Thank you, Daddy.”

“And there’s one more present.” He grabbed my hand and winked at me. “You don’t have to see her anymore, sweetie.”

It took a moment before I realized *her* meant my mother.

“You’re old enough now to decide for yourself. The judge made that clear in the custody agreement.” His face was utterly gleeful, as if this second “present” were the real prize. I stared at him, my mouth agape.

“Like, no more contact? Ever?”

“It’s your call. Your mother agreed to it. Hell, she’s probably just as happy as you are to be rid of the obligation.”

I pasted a shaky smile on my face. “Um, okay. I guess so. If that’s what you . . . she wants.”

I turn away from Dorothy, feeling my lips tugging downward. “I was only sixteen. She should have insisted I see her. She should have fought for me! She was my mother.” My voice breaks, and I have to wait a moment before I’m able to continue. “My dad called to tell her. It was as if she’d been waiting for me to suggest it. When he stepped out of his office, he simply said, ‘It’s over, sweetie. You’re off the hook.’”

I cover my mouth and try to swallow, glad for once that Dorothy can’t see me. “Two years later, she came for my high school graduation, claiming to be so proud of me. I was eighteen then, and so hurt I could barely speak to her. What did she expect after two years of silence? I haven’t seen her since.”

“Hannah, I know your father meant the world to you, but . . .” She pauses, as if searching for the right words. “Is it possible he kept you from your mother?”

“Of course he did. He wanted to protect me. She hurt me over and over again.”

“That’s your story—*your* truth. You believe it; I understand that. But that doesn’t mean it’s *the* truth.”

Even though she’s blind, I swear Mrs. Rousseau can see right into my soul. I swipe my eyes. “I don’t want to talk about this.” The ottoman scrapes on the concrete as I stand to leave.

“Sit down,” she tells me. Her voice is stern, and I obey her.

“Agatha Christie once said that inside each of us is a trapdoor.” She finds my arm and squeezes it, her brittle nails biting my skin. “Beneath that door lie our darkest secrets. We keep that trapdoor firmly latched, desperately trying to fool ourselves, making believe those secrets don’t exist. The lucky ones might even come to believe it. But I fear you, my dear, are not one of the lucky ones.”

She feels for my hands and takes the stone from me. She places it into the velvet pouch along with the other stone, and pulls tight the drawstring. With her outstretched hands, she searches the air until she finds my tote. Finally settling on it, she tucks the pouch inside.

“You’ll never find your future until you reconcile your past. Go. Make your peace with your mama.”

I stand barefoot in my kitchen, where copper pots hang from hooks above my granite island. It is nearly three o’clock Saturday, and Michael will be here at six. I like to time my baking so that when Michael arrives, my condo is filled with the homey scent of fresh-baked bread. My blatant attempt at domestic seduction. And tonight I need all the reinforcement I can gather. I’ve decided to take Dorothy’s advice and tell Michael straight up that I don’t want to leave New Orleans—i.e., him. My heart speeds at the very thought of it.

With greased hands, I lift the sticky ball from the mixing bowl and turn it onto a floured breadboard. I work the dough with the heels of my palms, pushing it away, watching it fold over itself. In the cupboard beneath the island, less than a foot from where I stand, sits a shiny Bosch bread mixer. It was a Christmas gift from my father three years ago. I didn’t have the heart to tell him that I am a sensualist, that I prefer to knead my dough by hand, a ritual that dates back over four thousand years, when the ancient Egyptians first discovered yeast. I wonder whether it was just another tedious task for the Egyptian ladies, or if they found it relaxing, as I do. For me, it is soothing, the monotonous push and pull of the dough, the chemical transformation, barely visible, as the flour, water, and leavening become silky and glutinous.

It was my mother who taught me that the word *lady* evolved from the medieval English phrase *dough kneader*. Like me, my mother had a passion for baking. But where did she learn this piece of trivia? I never saw her read, and her mother didn't even have a high school education.

I push a strand of hair from my forehead with the back of my hand. Ever since Dorothy ordered me to make peace with my mother three days ago, I can't stop thinking of her. Is it possible she really did try to contact me?

There's only one person who might know. Without waiting another minute, I rinse my hands and pick up my phone.

It's one o'clock Pacific Time. I listen as the phone rings, picturing Julia out on her lanai, reading a romance novel, or maybe doing her nails.

“Hannah Banana! How are you?”

The joy in her voice makes me feel guilty. For the first month after my dad died, I called Julia daily. But quickly the calls dwindled to once a week, then once a month. It's been since Christmas that I last spoke to her.

I gloss over details about Michael and my job. “Everything's great,” I say. “How about you?”

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