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THE

*Wandering*

SEASON

*a novel*

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HARPER MUSE

*The Wandering Season*

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## Chapter 1

DECEMBER 24  
ESTES PARK, COLORADO

Colorado snow was charming in December, as winter was just making herself at home. Rarely was there more than a heavy dusting—a few inches at the outside—and it had the good manners to depart within a day or two. The more insistent snow, the kind that wore out its welcome in a hurry, was reserved for March: The time when every sane person wanted to vacate the state of Colorado in favor of a beach and a rum-based cocktail. Preferably with a magenta paper umbrella in it. Instead, most of us went skiing, which at least made putting up with the snow feel worthwhile.

I loved the wintery whimsy of the tree-lined drive up the mountains, and as I pulled in front of my parents' cabin, I was glad I'd made the trek alone. At least, that's what I told myself. I certainly felt relief that Jonathan wasn't turning seven shades of Kermit the Frog green in the passenger seat, but at some point, someone would question his absence.

My boyfriend of four years had always hated the windy drive

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up Highway 36 from Denver, even though he'd been the one behind the wheel. He was a California boy, lured to Denver by good jobs and scenery. He loved Colorado but was more comfortable in LA gridlock than on a mountain road. He had usually opted out of trips to see my parents since he was so prone to motion sickness, preferring to see them when they came down to the city where we lived and worked. I sensed he was low-key baffled as to why they'd retired to such a place. Yes, it was the gateway to Rocky Mountain National Park. Sure, it had world-class hiking and some of the most stunning mountain views in the world. But a lot of great hiking and scenery could be found elsewhere in the state on four-lane highways that didn't twist like a sommelier's fine Laguiole corkscrew.

He never understood our attachment to Estes, and that was okay. Some things could only be explained by a childhood full of memories. But his barely veiled disdain for the small mountain town was just another reason why our recent split didn't hurt as much as it should have. This place didn't *have* to be important to him, but it should have mattered that it was important to us. To me. The breakup was ultimately the right decision, but it would bring the conversation to other areas of my life that didn't quite sit well with the rest of the family. I was almost twenty-seven, and they'd all expected me to have graduated culinary school and be well on my way to a Michelin star by now, but I'd subverted their expectations.

I took a steady breath and went to the cargo area of my nine-year-old Toyota SUV. I hoisted out the heaviest of the boxes, trying not to grunt under the weight of small-batch Hawaiian vanilla pods, ethically sourced cocoa, and a ton of freshly ground almond flour and quinoa for the gluten-free menu at my mother's bakery. Left to haul in was a case of Colorado wine Mom was partial to, a bottle of locally distilled whiskey for Dad, and Avery's favorite truffle chips.

Those things weren't for the shop, but rather because my parents had become like family to my vendors.

Dad rushed over from the front porch to relieve me of the box. "Holy cow, Shortcake, did you leave any food in Denver?"

I kissed his cheek in greeting before grabbing another load from the cargo area. "A bit. But I have to help Mom replenish her stock of vanilla."

"Just don't let it eat too far into your profit margins, kiddo."

My heart tugged a bit. He wanted to press further, but he wasn't going to because of the holiday. He was always more than a little worried that my niche business ran too close to the red. And some months that was true. But the more time that passed, the larger and more impressive my client list became. I didn't hold my breath when the rent came due anymore, and there was no better feeling than to have that small sense of security.

My little venture was called The Kitchen Muse. I was a food broker, but more specialized. I wasn't the person to get you a dozen hundred-pound bags of brand-name flour, but I could be counted on to let you know what farm had the best spinach this year and would drive to Hatch, New Mexico, for a client to ensure the best pickings during green chile season. I liked to consider myself a food matchmaker. If a restaurant or gourmet boutique shop was in need of truffles from a specific region of Italy, I was the girl to call. Closer to home, I could work magic. If a mom-and-pop kitchen out of Boulder was making standout artisanal cheese and charcuterie meats, I would help them find outlets to sell their goods and, hopefully, expand their business. For this reason, my SUV often smelled like a farmers' market stall rather than a store-bought air freshener. And I loved it.

Inside, the decadent aromas of Mom's toffee interlaced with her

famous cinnamon rolls proving on the counter for morning enveloped me just as tightly as her embrace. “You have to let me pay you like any other client, Vero.” Mom shook her head as we unloaded the rest of the boxes. Hers wasn’t the only bakery in the small town, but the ingredients I sourced for her made her menu unique. No one else had hibiscus croissants or Napoleons made with hand-whipped *crème anglaise*, flavored with extract she’d made herself. She paired the vanilla pods I sourced with alcohols that would tease out the best flavor and perfume. She loved soaking the spicy Tahitian pods in a top-shelf rum or the floral Madagascar in brandy. I wasn’t sure what she’d do with the Hawaiian varieties I’d found for her, but I was excited to find out.

I took my familiar arms-akimbo stance. “You’re not like any other client. You’re my mom. I accept payment in samples only.”

Her hands were already busy dusting the top of her famous Christmas Eve lasagna with a final layer of Parmesan before putting it in the oven, but she angled her cheek for another kiss. “I owe you a bakery’s worth of samples at this point, darling. You’re too good to me. What did your client think of my vanilla?”

“Fairbanks has taken my ideas and run with them.” I was unable to conceal my pride. He was one of the most prestigious chefs in all of Denver and was hungry for a Michelin star. My idea for him to stack his holiday menu with dishes inspired by my mother’s assortment of homemade vanilla extracts had infused him with some much-needed inspiration. Not just desserts, but some sauces for the savory dishes and a whole line of out-of-this-world cocktails I was particularly proud of.

“Well, it was a brilliant idea, my dear. I’ll get all these lovely vanilla beans soaking in a few days. They’ll be ready by next Christmas if he wants more.”

“If his receipts were what I expect they were, I’m sure he will.” I whisked in next to her to toss together the vinaigrette I made every year to go on the salad that accompanied the meal. “Every time I’ve gone past 540 Blake this month, it’s been packed.”

“Just think how well your own place would do,” Dad chided.

I felt the enamel of my teeth begin to strain as my jaw clenched which it did whenever this topic bubbled to the surface.

Mom shot him one of her infamous *looks*. “Martin James Stratton, don’t you dare. Veronica doesn’t need your prodding today. It’s Christmas Eve for heaven’s sake.” The rest didn’t have to be said: *And she’s just been through a breakup and is living in that tiny apartment all by herself. She’s three cats away from being the punchline of a joke.*

I leaned over and planted another kiss on her cheek in wordless thanks.

Dad held up his hands in defeat. “I know, Elena. I know.”

I put on a falsely bright voice. “Hey, we got it out of the way early. What’s a family meal without the ‘when is Veronica opening her own restaurant’ spiel? It’s refreshing to have it over so early in the day.”

This was Veronica-speak for *please dop it already*. The argument was an old one, and there was no good to be had from rehashing it. Mom and Dad had been fortunate enough—privileged enough—to craft the life of their dreams. I got the feeling that my not having met some of the same benchmarks by the age of twenty-six worried them a bit. Not because they had many specific expectations for my future, but because they were so adamant that whatever bent my life took, it should be as happy as theirs had been.

We’d lived in the suburbs in a spacious house, usually with a lovable cat or two underfoot. Mom didn’t have to work, so she spent her days making Martha Stewart and Paula Deen look like talented



amateurs. It was an idyllic upbringing. But the agreement was once Dad retired, it was Mom's turn to call some shots. Most of them. She had put all her energy into supporting the three of us for so long that when she said she wanted to leave the 'burbs and move to the small-town where we'd vacationed two weeks every summer, Dad put our childhood house on the market and found a rambling cabin before the month was out.

Once settled, Mom never adjusted to the reality of her empty nest. She needed to occupy her time, her hands. Dad helped her secure a bakery on a prime spot of real estate on the bustling downtown avenue that served as the tourist hub, and The Summit Sweet Shop was born. In the four years she'd been in business, she'd created a zealous following of the carbohydrate agnostic. My sister, Avery, helped her with social media and marketing, but really, the food stood for itself. It seemed like an SUV load of high-quality ingredients was the least I could do to support her dreams.

Half an hour later, a short, friendly burst of a car horn sounded from outside, causing all eyes to turn to the door. "Sounds like Hurricane Avery is about to make landfall." Dad made a motion like he was bracing himself for impact against the counter. Mom swatted his shoulder and dashed to the door, where Avery was striding up the walk, dragging a suitcase large enough for a six-month expedition in the Antarctic behind her with one hand and a couple of train cases loaded with cosmetics and hair product gripped in her other hand.

I hung back as my parents got swept up in the wake of her exuberance and the cloud of her Burberry perfume. Avery had finished at the Parsons School of Design four years before—coinciding with Dad's retirement—and was already becoming a name in New York's fashion industry. And it was no shock to anyone she was so successful so early in her career. She'd commandeered Mom's be-

loved Bernina sewing machine when she was twelve and had begun wearing her own designs ever since.

To know Avery was to love her, but it was just as easy to be eclipsed by her. Literally. I stopped growing at five-foot-three and was lean with red hair I kept in a bob. She was closer to six feet with long, wavy black hair like Mom's and had the sort of figure one found on marble statues of Greek goddesses. She was the boisterous one, while I was more reserved. I was the sort that holed up for weeks studying, while she was the one who breezed into class and aced the test without a backward glance at her notes.

She was the perfect blend of Dad's brains and business sense and Mom's magnetic charm and impeccable people skills. It was hard not to be dazzled by the trio of them at times. Dad was a financial genius. Mom was a veritable kitchen wizard. Avery, at barely twenty-five years of age, was the next Valentino in the making. I never begrudged them their successes, but at times I felt small by comparison.

"Mom, it looks amazing!" Avery enveloped me in a hug before gliding into the living room, which was decked out in the same Christmas decorations my parents had been using for decades. The same ornaments on the tree, the same set of reindeer statues on the coffee table, the same light-up ceramic tree with three missing bulbs that Avery and I had both adored so much that Mom found us each a replica of our own when we moved out. Mine was in a place of honor, the only holiday decoration I bothered with in my little one-bedroom Denver apartment.

My very favorite of their decorations was the display of fifteen little ceramic Santas from all over the world from various points in history. It had been a gift to Dad from some client at his firm when I was a baby, and I'd been enamored with it since the time I was old

enough to understand the holiday.

I walked to the wall where it hung and traced a finger on the bottom of the wooden display case with fifteen tiny nooks. From the 1925 pudgy American Santa, looking like he'd just finished shooting a Coca Cola ad for *The Saturday Evening Post*, to the especially lean and regal Czech Father Christmas circa 1882. I loved how each culture had their version of the spirit of giving wrapped up in one man. I'd made up stories about them when I was a child. More specifically, I'd envisioned the treats each one would have brought to good children each year. The English Santa brought marzipan and toffees, the French one almond nougat and chocolate truffles. The American one, of course, brought classic candy canes and Hershey's bars.

My nature-loving dad always insisted on a living tree that could be replanted after the holidays. Back when we were kids living in the city, he had donated the trees to the Forest Service, but now that he had enough land, each Christmas tree was planted in a place of honor on their acreage in the new year. The piney perfume it diffused in the living room was a million times more vibrant than the freshest cut tree. Mom and Dad's ability to make this place a haven left me with a tingling in my chest.

Avery linked her arm in mine. "Let's put our stuff under the tree."

"You got it." I grabbed the pile of wrapped gifts for the family from the corner where I'd deposited them. We got down on our hands and knees to add the presents to the beautifully wrapped packages Mom and Dad already had in place. Avery arranged and rearranged everything so she could get Instagram-worthy photos. Of the tree, of me in front of the tree, of us together, and a dozen selfies . . . so many I worried for the space on her phone's hard drive.

"People in New York will love this." I assumed she spoke to me,

but her eyes were still glued to her screen. She was forever creating content for her social media feeds, and I knew I ought to be doing the same to help boost The Kitchen Muse, but I could never bring myself to be online nearly as much as she was.

She looked up and breathed contentedly, taking it all in without the phone as a barrier between her and the room. “A shop in the city would spend a fortune to bring in decorators who would spend months searching for vintage decor to replicate this vibe, and they’d never come close.”

“Well, Mom and Dad have had about thirty-five years to curate their collection.” I chuckled, as not a single piece had been “curated” to create an aesthetic. They were gifts or purchases made with love. “And you have to admit there isn’t a store window in Manhattan that can compare to this—” I gestured to the expansive views of Longs Peak and Eagle Cliff out the window.

“Not even close. But the city does have a few charms. Not to mention some of the best restaurants in the world and a sleeper sofa always at your disposal. If you don’t come see me, I’m going to start taking it personally.”

I felt bad about that, as she’d been asking for three years now. I’d tried explaining to her a zillion times that money was tight and I couldn’t afford travel that wasn’t work related, but there was no convincing her.

As if hearing my thoughts—an annoying habit of hers—she prodded. “I’d buy the ticket. And if you won’t take it from your kid sister, Dad would buy you one in a heartbeat.”

“Are you spending more of my money, Avery?” Dad’s mock-warning baritone rang from the kitchen. His hearing was uncanny when it came to his finances.

“To promote familial bliss and strengthen the bond between your

daughters,” she called back.

His tone lightened. “Carry on. You know my Amex number.”

I rolled my eyes. Dad’s joking reply wasn’t really a joke at all. Avery was welcome to punch in the numbers to his Platinum Card whenever she needed it, and she had no compunction about doing so. There was no other way she could have lived in comfort and safety in New York, especially when she was first settling in, and Mom and Dad were glad to supplement her wages even now that she was more established.

*“Things were different in the eighties and nineties when your mother and I were your age and getting started. I’d rather you spend your inheritances now and get ahead while you’re young. It’ll pay better dividends in the long run.”* Dad had repeated some version of this mantra regularly in the days when Avery was still hesitant to accept the money he offered freely.

That same offer would have been open to me, but I could never bring myself to accept it. I’d not asked Mom and Dad for a penny since college, beyond a few very candid answers about what I wanted for birthdays and Christmas when I was first starting out and desperate. I was adamant that I wouldn’t start asking for cash, no matter how bleak the ledgers were. On some level it would have felt like my accomplishments weren’t my own.

I nudged Avery, who just finished photographing the nativity set from her seventh angle. “To turn the tables back on you, I could have easily picked you up from the airport. You didn’t have to get a rental.”

She waved a hand dismissively. “Oh, I have so many travel points they basically gave it to me. And I like having a car of my own, you know?”

I saw the logic. The likelihood a friend from Denver or Boulder



would summon her to dinner was almost guaranteed. And it wasn't bluster that she'd already climbed the ladder to the point where trips to Milan and Paris were regular occurrences for her, and she was savvy enough to put all the expenses on a credit card with all sorts of travel perks before submitting her receipts to her company for reimbursement. She could probably get me a ticket to New York without making a dent in her frequent-flyer miles, but it didn't change the principle of the thing.

"It's hard for her to get away," Dad chimed in, trying to take my side. "Now that Denver is a Michelin city, her client list is apt to start booming more than it is now."

He cast me his best "I got you" glance and I returned a smile. The recent addition of Denver as a Michelin city couldn't help but be a boon to business. Chefs who struggled to stand out in New York or LA, where the dining scene was so established, might have a shot at being noticed in Denver, where the competition was growing but there was room for fresh blood. We'd already seen a few promising restaurants set up in the last year, and there was bound to be more.

Avery got to her feet, offered me a hand, and hoisted me to my feet. "Come on, it's not like you wouldn't be able to network while you're there. What if some amazing restaurant in the city was dying for just the thing one of your artisans produces? It could be the making of them. Think of your clients, Veronica."

"Heaven forbid the girl just goes for a few nice meals and a Broadway show or two." Mom sighed and gestured for us to come to the table and tuck in. The lasagna was tradition because it used to be something Mama could make in advance and freeze so she could focus her time preparing for the main meal on Christmas Day. But we grew to love it even more than her fancier dishes, so she made more of a fuss over it. As time went on and our Christmas Day meals grew

more casual, she insisted on making the lasagna fresh on Christmas Eve with her own homemade pasta and marinara. The mozzarella she bought from the local pizzeria that made their own, and she always used plenty of fresh basil.

“You must be glad the holidays are finally here.” Avery accepted a helping from Dad. “I bet the lead-up is chaos.”

“For sure. From Halloween to New Year’s Eve is insane, same as retail. People go out to do their holiday shopping and stop for lunch. They get tickets to *The Nutcracker* at the Performing Arts Center, so they make a night of it with a four-star dinner beforehand and dessert and drinks after. Of course, with all the boost in business, the restaurants want to bring their A game. And that’s not even getting into the boutique gourmet shop demand. Everyone becomes Julia Child over the holidays. I only get a few days to breathe because I got my clients stocked up early for the last push today, and they’re mostly all closed tomorrow. My January 2 is like Dad’s April 16 used to be.”

“The best day of the year.” Dad lifted a glass, clearly without much nostalgia for the office.

It was true: January was the doldrums for me. The kind that I looked forward to during the height of the summer tourist season and dreaded when it actually arrived. Some people were able to shift between the frenzied panic at work and downtime. My Dad was one of those. Every single year, Dad took a long weekend off right after Tax Day, slept, and watched crap TV. He’d go fishing if he felt really ambitious, which wasn’t often. Once the long weekend was over, one set of grandparents or the other would come to watch Avery and me for a week, and Dad whisked Mom someplace tropical to get out of the late-spring gloom. They counted down the minutes to it every year with the same enthusiasm Avery and I had

anticipating Christmas morning.

For me, January was just when I tried to make pennies stretch and hoped my clients would all weather the seasonal downturn with their businesses intact. There would be a small flurry of tourists coming for the famed National Western Stock Show, but they mostly flocked to either the dreaded chain restaurants or, in the best-case scenario, the nicer steak houses. They mostly gave the more adventurous upscale restaurants, my clients, a miss. There wouldn't be tropical vacations to celebrate the quiet season for many years yet, but I clung to the hope the time would come.

After dinner, so full we could barely walk, we gathered in the living room around the tree. Mom and Dad on their favorite chairs, I on the sofa, and Avery on the ottoman, poised to play Santa as she did every year. She'd had little patience for it as a kid but loved doling out presents slowly now that she was grown. She drew the evening out, giving us time to admire one another's gifts before moving on to the next.

Mom loved the silk robe, and Dad was chuffed with the golf polos Avery had brought for them from her swanky contacts in New York. I gushed over the shoes she procured for me, even though the heels were so high I would probably never wear them. Part of me loved that she thought I was the sort of person who *would* wear them.

I'd done my best to supplement the food items I'd brought with real gifts, but there was no keeping up with Avery. The department store sweater, the little wooden house from the Denver Christkindlmarkt, and the alpaca scarf from the Estes Park Wool Market were received warmly enough, but I simply couldn't afford to be as generous as Avery, at least not with gifts. But, as always, Dad won at gifting. The photo album he'd had made of the heaps of photos from our summer trips to Estes over the years had Mom in tears.

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“That looks like it,” Dad proclaimed, unable to see anything left under the tree from his vantage point in the recliner. “A good haul. Apparently we fooled Santa again this year.”

Avery sprung to her feet. “Not quite, I have one last gift for you all to finish off the evening.” She rummaged in her massive purse and pulled out four small boxes, all brightly colored with vaguely science-adjacent graphics all over them. “A new DNA company, FamilyRoots, just rolled out home kits in time for the holidays. We share a building, and they gave us all a slew of these to be neighborly. They’d love reviews but probably don’t expect them. Lots of good health info apparently. I thought you’d think they were fun . . . We can all take them.”

Mom’s and Dad’s faces blanched. “Avery, I don’t think this is a good idea.” Mom stood and made a move like she wanted to take the tests from Avery’s hands.

Avery swooped them away before Mom could intercept them. “Why? They keep the data secure. From some of the protocols their floor has in place, I believe them.”

“It’s not that,” Dad said.

I took a hefty gulp of the champagne, which was likely a crime punishable by flogging in several *départements* in France, and set the flute aside. “It’s because I was adopted, right?”

## *About the Author*

Internationally bestselling author AIMIE K. RUNYAN writes to celebrate unsung heroines. She has written eight historical novels (and counting!) and is delving into the exciting world of contemporary women's fiction. She has been a finalist for the Colorado Book Award, a nominee for the Rocky Mountain Fiction Writers' "Writer of the Year," and a Historical Novel Society's Editors' Choice selection. Aimie is active as a speaker and educator in the writing community in Colorado and beyond. She lives in the beautiful Rocky Mountains with her wonderful husband, two (usually) adorable children, two very sweet cats, and a pet dragon.



Visit her online at [aimiekrunyan.com](http://aimiekrunyan.com)

Instagram: [@bookishaimie](https://www.instagram.com/bookishaimie)

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