

The
Charmed
Library

a novel

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
JENNIFER MOORMAN

Praise for Jennifer Moorman

“This twisty, intriguing tale is brimming with atmosphere, heart-break, magic, and ultimately a bright spark of hope!”

—RACHEL LINDEN, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *The Magic of Lemon Drop Pie*, FOR *The Vanishing of Josephine Reynolds*

“In *The Vanishing of Josephine Reynolds*, Moorman deftly weaves her trademark everyday magic into a tale of time travel, mystery, and romance. At the heart of the story is Josephine, a young woman so stricken by grief that she wishes to no longer exist. Transported to the 1920s when she passes through a magical door, Josephine has one last chance at life—if she can find the courage to live and love again.”

—KERRY ANNE KING, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *Improbably Yours*

“An ancestral home holds stories, secrets, and maybe even the ability to rewrite history in Jennifer Moorman’s latest enthralling must-read. *The Vanishing of Josephine Reynolds* seamlessly blends the present day with 1927—and a splash of Moorman’s signature magic—in a moving, unputdownable race against time. A testament to family ties, the power of love, and the indomitable human spirit, Moorman’s latest proves that, sometimes, the impossible can become possible. I was hooked from the very first enchanting page.”

—KRISTY WOODSON HARVEY, *New York Times* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *A Happier Life*

“*The Vanishing of Josephine Reynolds* drips with lush Jazz Age detail, a vivid cast of characters, and a protagonist whose future literally depends on her ability to navigate the past. In one novel, Jennifer Moorman gives us a time-bending tale of both suspense and self-

discovery and a heroine we can't help but cheer as she learns what she's truly made of—and perhaps, how to love again.”

—BARBARA DAVIS, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *The Echo of Old Books*

“*The Vanishing of Josephine Reynolds* is absolutely mesmerizing! Jennifer Moorman expertly weaves a story of time travel, suspense, love, and the 1920s into a book with twists and turns and an ending I never saw coming. I stayed up WAY too late for too many nights simply because I couldn't put it down. It's magnificent!”

—MADDIE DAWSON, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *Let's Pretend This Will Work*

“Jennifer Moorman charms readers again with this time-traveling delight. Join Josephine Reynolds as she visits the 1920s, trying to right a wrong that set into motion a series of life-threatening events. Fanciful and fast-paced, *The Vanishing of Josephine Reynolds* is another winner for Moorman.”

—ELIZABETH BASS PARMAN, AUTHOR OF *The Empress of Cooke County*

“*The Vanishing of Josephine Reynolds* charms all the way from the enchanted door and its whispered passwords to the raucous speakeasy. It is impossible not to root for Josephine as she fights against the sands of time—and her own vanishing—to save her family and unearth her truest self in the process. Jennifer Moorman shines.”

—GRACE HELENA WALZ, AUTHOR OF *Southern by Design*

“*The Magic All Around* is brimming with lyrical Southern beauty, page-turning mystery, and delightful magic. With a house built of enchanted wood, a mother-daughter bond that changes a life, a family saga that brings you home, and a captivating love story, *The Magic All Around* is a work of storytelling-art. For readers of Sara

Addison Allen and Lauren K. Denton, this is your next captivating read. If we have eyes to see and ears to hear, Jennifer Moorman is here to remind us that there really is magic all around.”

—PATTI CALLAHAN HENRY, *New York Times* BESTSELLING AUTHOR
OF *The Secret Book of Flora Lea*

“Brimming with love, and crackling with magic, this story will feel like home on a page—whether it’s the home you miss or the home you’re hoping to find.”

—NATALIE LLOYD, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *A Snicker of Magic*,
FOR *The Magic All Around*

“Charming, enchanted and delightfully Southern, Jennifer Moorman’s *The Magic All Around* is a cozy story of family, love and finding yourself. Perfect for fans of Heather Webber and Sarah Addison Allen!”

—LIZ PARKER, AUTHOR OF *In the Shadow Garden*

“Full of Southern charm, second chances, and an opinionated old house that’s as (lovingly) meddling as a well-meaning aunt, *The Magic All Around* is sure to delight. Jennifer Moorman’s latest is equal parts magical and hopeful, revealing the healing power of love.”

—SUSAN BISHOP CRISPELL, AUTHOR OF *The Secret Ingredient of Wishes*

“Combine four parts love, two parts excitement, a dash of humor, and a pinch of magic, and you have Jennifer Moorman’s delightful *The Baker’s Man*. Moorman’s sweet, heartfelt confection will please anyone looking for a charming, witty, utterly delectable read!”

—LAUREN K. DENTON, *USA TODAY* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *The Hideaway* AND *A Place to Land*

“Jennifer Moorman’s *The Baker’s Man* is a teaspoon of love, a dash of magic, and a whole heaping cup of Southern charm. Anna’s legacy of unconventional romance and luscious baked goods is a treat from start to finish. Perfect for fans of Amy E. Reichert and Jenny Colgan.”

—AIMIE K. RUNYAN, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *The School for German Brides* AND *The Memory of Lavender and Sage*

“*The Baker’s Man* is a charming recipe of magic, romance, friendship, and the importance of staying true to yourself.”

—HEATHER WEBBER, *USA TODAY* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *Midnight at the Blackbird Café*

“*The Baker’s Man* hits my sweet spot with mouthwatering baked goods and an enchanting romance. Jennifer Moorman’s scrumptious tale has all the magical ingredients: best friend banter, small town drama, and the mysterious arrival of the perfect man!”

—AMY E. REICHERT, AUTHOR OF *Once Upon a December*

ALSO BY JENNIFER MOORMAN

The Magic All Around

The Vanishing of Josephine Reynolds

THE MYSTIC WATER NOVELS

A Slice of Courage Quiche

The Necessity of Lavender Tea

The Baker's Man

RETELLINGS OF FOLKLORE, MYTH, AND MAGIC

Nina, the Bear's Child

The Charmed Library

A Novel

JENNIFER MOORMAN



HARPER MUSE

The Charmed Library

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To you, the one who's always wanted to have a slumber party in the library and magic your favorite fictional character out of a book. I'll bring the snacks.



“I almost wish I hadn’t gone down that rabbit-hole—and yet—and yet—it’s rather curious, you know, this sort of life!”

—Alice from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*



The only thing that you absolutely have to know, is the location of the library.

—Albert Einstein

Prologue

Stella Parker had never burned a book in her life. Had never once thrown pages of text—much less handwritten love letters and poetry—into a fire. Yet there she was, purposefully setting fire to one of the most precious things in her life: words.

Wisps of smoke and ashes floated from the ancient flue on a blistering Saturday early-evening breeze. The haze rounded corners, spiraled up tree trunks along the Main Street sidewalk, and lingered in pockets of shadow. The townsfolk in Blue Sky Valley, North Carolina, stumbled into the ashy air unexpectedly and were overcome with longing. Many were compelled to hurry home and hug someone or to buy a journal and write down their thoughts. Some wandered out into the mature pine forest until the soothing sounds of birds and the soft green blanket of grass beneath their feet helped lessen the ache. None were aware of *why* they felt the unusual emotions or that their peace came at the cost of Stella's heartache.

Deep inside the town's library, where dust mites danced in the slanted light and the walls hummed with the energy of a million sto-

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ries, the words Stella sacrificed did not simply vanish—they would always belong to this town, to its magic, to the unseen force that wove Blue Sky Valley together. As the ashes faded into the dusk, the library listened, waiting, knowing that every story—especially the ones set free—would find its way home.

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Chapter 1

Brilliant orange flames separated inside the decades-old furnace as Stella stared, mesmerized. The fire burned hot at its core, blackening the edges of the paper and ravenously consuming everything within its steel walls. Stella, frustrated and tired of her own heartache, waited for the pressure to release from her solar plexus—that spot just below her rib cage that ached every time something was *wrong*. But so far, the discomfort had only intensified.

Even as she watched her journal burn, along with every word she'd written over the past few months, her fingers itched to record this event, to detail the way the ink-stained pages writhed in the flames, the way flecks of paper lifted on pops of air and danced before shriveling.

Guilt planted a seed deep in her belly and started to grow something thorny and tangled. Her stomach clenched when three golden, shimmering words rose from the flames and slid out the open mouth of the furnace. They glittered against the black metal like stars in a midnight sky. **Surrender. Anew. Forgiveness.**

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Was the journal forgiving her? Or were the words telling her she needed to extend forgiveness? But to whom? Not *him*. No way did he deserve her forgiveness. The lines between Stella's brows deepened. Didn't surrender mean *giving up*? What was left to give up? As if life hadn't asked her to give up too much already. The glowing words dissipated into the darkness of the basement.

There would always be another journal to fill. Because there would never be enough paper, enough *space*, to release all the words clawing, springing, secreting their way out of her. There would never be an end to smears of ink on her fingers or the phrases that trailed up the walls. She would forever see words slinking across floors and slipping into her room at night like best friends intent on keeping her company.

For as long as she could remember, Stella had seen words the same way someone might spot a bird or watch a dragonfly zipping through cattails. She saw words everywhere. Ever since she'd received her first pack of crayons, she'd been crowding white spaces with all the words pressing in on her heart. Stella captured words and poems and catalogued them in journals. She drew word maps in colored ink in her diaries and added special captions to photographs when words floated over images in a family album. She jotted down people's names and the words that followed them like beloved pets. She made notes about places around town and all the words living there, even the haunted ones she sometimes saw ghosting around. Words like *eerie*, *bewitched*, and *phantasmic*.

When Stella was a child, her mother had encouraged her to share the words, insisting her talent was a fantastical gift that would guide Stella toward her dreams. Desiring the special attention and wanting to please her mother, Stella kept, wrote, and cherished the words. But after her mother was gone, the idea that the words could lead Stella to her dreams seemed like a terrible joke. In what dreams

did mothers leave? She tried to ignore the words. She wanted to refuse their neediness to be caught and loved.

But Stella quickly realized she didn't have a choice. She couldn't neglect the words. She couldn't stop their appearance or keep them housed inside her. Some days the words felt like a swarm of agitated bees living in her body, and to release their fury, she had to write. She worried she might implode if she didn't free them, if she didn't give them new life on the page. What if she kept them trapped inside and then suffocated beneath their creative weight?

Some days the words were delicate and soft like goose feathers floating through her. On those days she felt light and joyful, and her pen flowed across the pages like water easing down a river. She learned to pay just enough attention to the words to catalog them with the hope that they would eventually stop showing up when she grew up.

That had yet to happen, and today irritation stung her. Why hadn't setting fire to her past—literally—soothed her? Why couldn't she burn the words, the *emotions*, as easily as the flames destroyed the paper?

Maybe she was being dramatic. That was what her older brother, Percy, would say in his easy teasing way, but there was probably a whole lot of truth laced through his jokes. Where Stella was emotional, Percy was even-keeled. Where she was paralyzed some days by the frantic beating of her own heart, Percy appeared perpetually calm and peaceful.

The fire crackled, and Wade Haynes' smiling face lurked in her mind. Her jaw clenched. The last time she'd seen him was when he walked out of her apartment six months ago, leaving behind a stifling feeling of failure, a fast-food receipt stained with the greasy fingerprints of his children, and two simple, charred-black words: *passing time*. She'd been all-in with that relationship, believing

they were both in love. But his walking away and never contacting her again proved she couldn't have been more wrong. The truth that he'd simply been *passing time* with her filled her with shame and fury.

The rejection still pricked like she'd eaten stinging nettles. Stella had filled a journal full of letters and poems she would never send, *couldn't* send to Wade. Now, months later, on the anniversary of their first date, two cups of overly sweet coffee churned in her belly. She knelt in front of the wood-burning furnace in the library's basement and tested Ray Bradbury's temperature hypothesis. Did paper catch fire at 451 degrees Fahrenheit? How could she even prove the author's statement? The antique thermometer gauge didn't register above two-hundred-fifty degrees. The more important hypothesis was: Would setting fire to words inspired by Wade set her free?

The answer was no.

She wanted to burn Wade's memory from her heart, turn it all to ashes she could sweep up and dump into the garbage. But instead, a memory of Wade and her laughing surfaced. Followed by the memory of the afternoon she met him at the state park and he'd taken her in his arms and spun her around. Then the day he'd tried to waltz with her in the art gallery and they'd almost knocked over a porcelain vase. Next, the time they went to the movies, sat in the back row like teenagers, and he couldn't stop kissing her. Then the day he'd texted her ten different haikus about his love for her and how they'd be connected forever.

"Enough!" she spat and squeezed her eyes closed as if that would stop the barrage. Her shoulders slumped. She and Wade had been happy. *Really* happy—until they weren't.

Stella glanced at the furnace. Words and books were some of the few things that understood her. How many times had she wished to disappear into a novel? Would the thousands of books in the library above her now chant *murderer*? Would she walk the gauntlet of their

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disapproval, their condemnation? Warm tears of frustration left wet tracks on her cheeks. Tears heavy with sorrow splattered on the floor, and the ground trembled beneath her feet, sending out waves of disappointment.

"I'm sorry," she whispered as the thin journal cover shriveled in the furnace.

A sheet of paper, charred and brittle around the edges, lifted on a wave of heat and floated out of the furnace opening. Stella pinched it between two fingers. Burns like bullet holes marred some of the words, but she had memorized the poem.

*The sky was endless,
the silence deep.
The sun dropped into the trees
and I never once tried to stop it,
only watched and shivered
in the wind,
in the absence of you.
I love you with a love
that wounds.
Reckless, stubborn, willful.
I hug my ribs,
thank them for caging my heart
or else I'd never have control of it,
if I ever do.
I love you with a love
that overcomes me
like the tide,
rusting away,
stealing everything from my grasp,
even you.*

Stella sighed. Blackened paper crumbled around the edges and fell toward the floor like dying butterflies. She kneeled in front of the furnace, sailed the poem back into the flames, and watched it burn to ash.

The basement door at the top of the stairs opened, sending golden light down the steps, highlighting the worn treads. “Stella?”

She jumped to her feet, swiped at her wet cheeks, and slammed the furnace door shut, singeing the skin on her fingertips. The fire hissed and swelled inside its metal cage. She shook out her hand, trying to cool her fingers, and winced. “Be right up,” she called.

The first few steps creaked as Arnold Cohen, the head librarian, descended halfway. “Should I ask why you’re using the furnace? Don’t look so shocked. A few of the windows are open, and it looks like I have a fog machine going upstairs in the historical stacks.”

Stella glanced over her shoulder at the furnace before meeting Arnie at the staircase. She cleared her throat. “I was testing hypotheses.”

His thick, graying eyebrows lifted. “And?”

Stella gripped the handrail and tugged herself up the first few steps. The old wood groaned in resonance with her heart. “The results are disappointing.”

Behind his glasses, Arnie’s dark, deep-set eyes watched her, studied her. “You can’t burn away the past.”

She squeezed the railing harder. The nape of her neck tingled as though embers clung to her skin. Her exhalation shuddered in the space between them, rippling through the air. “I wish I had a shovel to dig it out then.”

“If you could have taken the easy way, what would you have learned? Nothing.”

Stella scowled. “And what have I learned, Arnie?”

“How to handle your heart differently next time.” Arnie turned

and ascended the stairs. “It didn’t escape me that you carried your journal down here and yet you’re not returning with it. I assume you want me to keep it a secret from the books upstairs that you tossed one of their brethren to the flames.”

Stella followed him up and switched off the basement light. A flickering glow quivered across the darkened concrete floor and caught her attention. Words formed in the cavorting shadows. **Goodbye. Forget. Next time.** There would be no *next time* for how to handle her heart; as far as she was concerned, her heart was a dead, useless thing taking up space in her chest. She closed and locked the basement door.



STELLA HAD OPENED the Blue Sky Valley Public Library that morning, having no idea that she’d sneak away that afternoon to burn her journal. Just after lunch, a visitor had wandered in.

The older woman, probably in her mid-sixties, had approached Stella at the circulation desk. She was looking for a self-help book, specifically one covering the topic of releasing the past. When they arrived at the section, Stella pointed out a few books that might be of interest, but the woman didn’t say anything for a moment.

“Is there anything else I can help you with?” Stella asked, sensing the woman’s hesitation.

Her tears surprised Stella, but not as much as her words. “Don’t do what I did.”

Such a broad declaration that included a world of options. The woman could be encouraging Stella not to wear orange lipstick as much as she could mean don’t rob the local bank.

She continued, “Don’t spend your life re-creating the past. He ran out on me twenty years ago for ‘the love of his life,’ and do you

know how I've spent those same twenty years?" Stella shook her head. "Angry, bitter, you name it. Now look at me!" Her voice rose above an acceptable library level. "Shriveled, that's what I am."

She wiped at her tears and forced a smile that looked more pained than natural. She pulled one of the self-help books from the shelf and smoothed her hand across its cover. "I'm on a road trip to find myself. I didn't realize until an hour ago that I had been taking him with me everywhere, holding what he did to me inside my body like a terrible disease. Reliving my past over and over again. He's been riding in the passenger seat this whole time. Metaphorically, of course."

The woman patted Stella's arm. "Listen to me, going on like I've lost it. Well, I plan to lose *him*, which is why I'm here and why I'm going to start with this book." She held out the choice to Stella. "Don't do what I did. Don't hold on to things that hurt you."

The woman's words echoed through Stella's mind long after she'd checked out the book and left the library. It wasn't until late afternoon when Stella consciously realized that she had the journal in her purse, which forced her to admit that she'd been carrying the memory of Wade around with her *for months*. Like an albatross around her neck.

Would she still be hung up on Wade twenty years from now? That question fueled her to burn the journal and attempt to burn Wade's memory along with it. She'd only half succeeded and was left with a growing sense of remorse.

There was no reason to stay until the library closed tonight. Arnie tried to send her home early. Only two people had come in during the late afternoon, and each stayed less than an hour. With no special activities happening that evening, Arnie could have handled the closing routine alone, but Stella wasn't in the mood to go home and sit.

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Because she wouldn't just sit; she'd fester about why she hadn't been able to incinerate Wade's memory from her heart. Next the guilt, possibly coupled with regret, would creep in about the burned journal. No, she'd rather go home after staying at the library as long as possible and then face-plant on her bed without thinking at all.

After working alongside Arnie as his library assistant for the past four years, the few nighttime procedures went quickly. At nine p.m. Stella said good night to Arnie, grabbed an armful of books she planned on reading during the next two weeks, and carried them to the rear parking lot. A creature of habit, Stella parked her car in the same spot every day. First row, fourth space, to the right of the library's exit.

This spot was covered in afternoon shade, thanks to a hundred-year-old oak tree, that kept her leather car seats from feeling like molten lava after sitting outside all day in the Southern heat. Years ago, the local Lions Club championed for the mature tree not to be harmed when the city paved the library's parking lot. The grand oak now grew out of an open circle in the black asphalt, and over time its enormous roots buckled and cracked the pavement like an overcooked hotdog, creating natural speed bumps throughout the lot.

As she walked to her car, Stella hopped over words that slipped out of the pavement's cracks. **Uno, due, tre, quattro, cinque.** She glanced at the book on top of her stack, an English-Italian dictionary. Her newest quest was to learn enough Italian that she could read Michelangelo's *Rime* in its original language. So far, she could count to ten, say a few casual greetings, and order *gelato al pistacchio*. Basically a vocabulary far outmatched by an Italian preschooler.

She placed the books in the passenger seat and drove in silence through downtown. Not much had changed in Blue Sky Valley since she was a kid, and tonight, its predictable routine comforted her. Many of the town's lights winked out one by one as she drove.

Some shop owners put their businesses to bed for the night, flipping around Closed signs and switching off interior lamps. Other businesses turned on lights, calling forth those interested in the night-life, which was far from wild in a small town like this. There wasn't much to do in the historic downtown area other than find consolation in the corner pub or dine at Bruno's Café.

Just on the edge of the town center was the theater that had room enough to show two movies only. Currently they were playing flashbacks—*Grease* and *Jaws*—and selling double feature tickets if someone wanted to first enjoy the summer nights with romance and then follow it up with being terrified to swim in the ocean.

Stella pulled into the shadowed driveway of her childhood home and pressed a button on the garage door opener attached to the visor. The aluminum door groaned as it lifted and revealed the almost-empty interior meant for two cars. She parked in the middle and then shuffled to the mailbox. All of today's mail was junk, but three different Realtor postcards were part of the stack. One had a note scribbled on it in blue ink. *Stella, Percy said you were ready to sell. Call me! Anita.*

Stella ripped the postcard in half and then dumped all the mail into the outside trash bin. She was tempted to call Percy and tell him to back off, but that would require a conversation she didn't have the energy for. She lowered the garage door behind her. Leaning into her open car door, she wrangled the stack of books from the passenger seat.

As she unlocked the house-to-garage door, she wondered for the umpteenth time why she bothered to lock a door that was secured behind a garage door no human could manually open from the outside. She knew this to be true because during a power outage last month, her car had been trapped in the garage. Not even YouTube how-to videos could help her figure out how to lift the metal door

when the pull cord was stuck. She hadn't been strong enough to tug it free, and since she lived alone, there was no one to help her. A peal of loneliness echoed through her now.

Stella dropped the books on the kitchen counter. "Hello, house," she said as she flipped on the hallway light. Her cell phone dinged, alerting her to a message from her best friend, Ariel. She grabbed a pencil from the kitchen counter, twirled her dark curls into a messy bun, and stabbed the pencil into her hair to hold it in place.

Ariel had moved to Blue Sky Valley, down the street from Stella on Magnolia Drive, when they were in fourth grade. Ariel introduced herself that very first day, and Stella knew they'd be fast friends. With airy words like **hope**, **enchantment**, and **stardust** floating around Ariel like confetti, how could anyone not gravitate toward her? Stella certainly had.

She grabbed the library books and carried them into the living room and debated whether she should tell Ariel about burning the journal. Just thinking about it caused her stomach to ache. But if anyone would understand, it was Ariel, who'd been by Stella's side through every celebration and every heartache since they were nine years old.

Stella opened Ariel's text: The first customer of the morning asked if I could dye her poodle red and cut her to look like Elmo. How do you cut a poodle to look like Elmo, I ask. She shows me a YouTube video that I can't unsee. How was your day? What's on the schedule tomorrow?

Stella smiled for the first time in hours, then texted: Tell me you said yes. Send photos. I'm about a solid 6 today on the scale of life. What would it be like to be a ten on life's enjoyment scale? What would she give to be free of the heaviness, to find her way to *real* love and joy? She continued: Tomorrow's library events include adventure club and maybe the knitting club. What's on tomorrow's agenda for

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you? Dogs groomed like dromedary camels?

Ariel replied: I did not agree to Elmo. That would have been a total dog-tastrophe. Nor would I agree to camels, although I could be bribed with the right gift. When are you gonna learn to knit so I can sell dog sweaters on the side? Breakfast tomorrow? I can pick you up in my sweet ride.

Stella laughed. The veterinary hospital had invested in a mobile dog grooming unit, and Ariel, the local dog groomer, drove it all over town and the surrounding towns six days a week. It put smiles on faces to see the neon-pink Fur Real Dog Grooming van drive by. The horn even sounded like a dog bark. Stella texted that she'd love to have breakfast, and they set a time for Ariel to swing by the library and pick her up.

Stella placed her phone on the counter, but it dinged again. Ariel again. Want to talk about why you're a 6 today? I've been told I'm THE BEST listener.

Just knowing Ariel cared and wanted to listen eased the ache inside Stella, but she didn't know how to articulate what she was feeling, so she replied: Thanks, but we can chat tomorrow. ♥

Stella opened the refrigerator, which was shockingly bare, and what little it did have wasn't snack-worthy. Suddenly, a burning sensation started in her heart, like a sparkler shoved straight through her chest. She released the refrigerator door and sidestepped, pressing a hand to her heart and leaning over in pain. Was this horrendous heartburn? A heart attack? A vision of the burning journal flared to life in her mind. In a panic, she thought, *Is this because I burned the words? Am I being punished?* The intensity scalded her insides and pushed "Dear Lord" from her lips.

In a moment that could have been ripped from a *Ghostbusters* movie, what looked like violet fluid struggled to rise from a kitchen tile, but once it fully emerged, it formed a group of words. Pulsat-

ing letters, dark plum in the center and pale lavender toward the edges. Undulating tendrils, like the roots of a plant, hung from the letters as if they'd been dug out of a magical garden. The words trembled across the floor near her feet.

"I fell in," she muttered, and instantly the burning in her chest subsided. Stella inhaled a deep breath and stood straight. The words rushed across the floor, up the bottom row of kitchen cabinets, and over the countertop until they wrapped around a purple pen near one of her half-used journals and then disappeared.

Stunned and slightly frightened, Stella stared at the pen and massaged her fingers into her chest. The words had never been so demanding, never so forceful. She'd also never seen words appear that way before. These were different, more alive, more substantial than they'd ever been.

Stella walked to the purple pen and opened the journal to a blank page. She didn't need to question what the words wanted. They *wanted* to be written down. But why? What did the words mean? At the top of a clean page, she wrote, *I fell in*.

Fell in what? Stella thought of a dozen things she'd fallen into over the past year. Despair, hopelessness, faux love. She'd also fallen into books, into fits of laughter with Ariel, and into silence at the sight of a sunset.

She stared at the purple words on the page, a crease forming between her brows. A shiver ran up her arms as she closed the journal. Part of her wanted to shrug off this new experience with her beloved words, to say it was no big deal. But she placed a hand over her heart and knew they were no ordinary words. They had an agenda . . . One that might burn a hole right through her.

Chapter 2

Sleeping peacefully wasn't in the scope of possibilities for Stella, not after the blistering eruption of purple words demanded her attention in a way that frightened her. When she was younger, Stella saw words every day, especially when her mother was still with them. As she'd grown, they slowed to appear a few times a week. But never, in all her years of word spotting, had *any* of them felt like last night. She desperately wished the purple-words experience was an anomaly, a freak occurrence.

But she had doubts—a truckload of them. Mainly because the words *I fell in* meant nothing to her, which led her to believe there was more . . . More what? She didn't know. The idea of more words accompanied by more pain bred trepidation within her.

At ten the next morning Stella dragged herself down the wide, concrete library entrance stairs, masking a yawn behind her hand. A pink van idled at the curb. Ariel waved at her through the window. A group of kids walking up the sidewalk made hand signals for Ariel to press the horn. She obliged, and the kids burst into laughter

at the artificial dog woofing. Oh to be young, rested, and joyful.

Stella opened the passenger door and hauled herself up into the cab. This month Ariel had a stripe of fuchsia dye ribboning through her blond ponytail. Last month it was sherbet orange, and the month before had been aqua, but only the hair underneath the top layer. Ariel's fresh face was makeup free with a tinted sunscreen to protect her fair complexion. A scattering of tan freckles connecting on the bridge of her button nose trailed along both cheeks. She looked rested, an obvious contrast to Stella's exhausted state.

"Thanks for picking me up." Stella wrinkled her nose at the smell of shampoo and cooked pork. "Why does it smell like—"

"Bacon? Delicious buttery biscuits?" Ariel finished. She reached behind her head to a built-in metal shelf and retrieved an oversize white paper sack. She handed the bag to Stella. The bottom was still warm.

"I swung by the diner and grabbed breakfast for us. You know how packed it is on Sundays, so I thought we could drive to the park but dine in so we can enjoy the AC. At first I considered a quick morning picnic, but—"

"It's June and definitely too hot?" Stella said.

"Like swampy hot," Ariel agreed. "You should see the line at Frost Bites."

Stella buckled her seat belt. "It's probably a mile long."

"At least two miles, and it's not even lunchtime." Ariel shifted the van into Drive. "Can you imagine what July and August will feel like?"

Stella nodded. "Like walking on the sun."

"Barefoot." Ariel slipped on a pair of oversize silver sunglasses and turned up the radio. "Under the Boardwalk" blasted on the oldies station, and Ariel belted out the tune as the van wound its way through town toward the city park. She glanced over at Stella.

“You’re not singing. Why aren’t you singing? We love this song.”

Stella yawned again and shrugged. “You take the solo today.”

Once they were parked and gazing out over a vibrant-green swath of grass and mature oak trees, Stella unpacked the bag on the dashboard. There was an egg white, kale, and tomato biscuit for Ariel and a bacon, egg, and cheese biscuit for Stella. Ariel had also ordered extra biscuits to share. Stella divided the wad of flimsy brown napkins and unwrapped her biscuit.

“I didn’t think to ask for plates,” Ariel said, folding down the paper wrapped around her biscuit.

Stella waved off the idea that they needed a fancier setup. “Just more trash to bother with. How’s your morning been? Any outrageous requests?”

Ariel covered her mouth and half chewed, half laughed. “Pretty tame morning. I had an early wash and trim first thing over in Willow Lake, and after this little break with you, my day is jam-packed. I’m counting on this breakfast to hold me over through the afternoon.”

“You need me to bring you lunch?” Stella asked. “I don’t mind, and Arnie won’t care if I cut out for a bit.”

Ariel shook her head, and her moonstone earrings swayed. “Nah, but thanks. I’d rather push through and then take a longer dinner break to eat without stressing about running behind.”

They ate in silence for a few beats. Stella’s mind drifted to last night’s words, and she rubbed a ghost ache from her collarbone. She couldn’t work out what any of it meant by overthinking, but that didn’t stop her brain from darting all over in an attempt to solve the mystery.

As she bit into the biscuit, her mind refocused on breakfast. The local diner, Grits & Gravy, baked the absolute best biscuits in the world, and Stella would debate this with anyone, knowing she’d

win. Unlike stereotype diners that were grease pits, Grits & Gravy was anything but a sloppy, grease-filled locale. The food was an unusual combination of comforting and sophisticated. The menu was filled with homey favorites, but all the ingredients were fresh and food was cooked to order, elevating the usual diner fare.

The buttery biscuit had a crunch on the bottom with a soft, pillowy, layered center, and Stella couldn't imagine anything more perfect to sandwich between it than her favorite breakfast combo: bacon, eggs, and melted American cheese.

"These biscuits are everything," she said.

Ariel nodded. "Divinely inspired."

"Mind-blowing."

Ariel lifted her hand and waved in the air. "Miraculous."

Stella laughed. "You win."

Ariel poked the last bite into her mouth. "These biscuits win."

Stella glanced out the passenger-side window. A young man tossed an orange frisbee to an overly eager border collie. A jogger ran by on the trail that wound through the park. Just thinking about going for a run exaggerated Stella's fatigue. She reached for a napkin and wiped a blob of cheese from the corner of her mouth.

Ariel cleared her throat and turned down the radio's volume. "Maybe I'm wrong, but you seem a bit off today. I'm also interested in why you were a six yesterday. Does it have something to do with why you're giving off a muddy vibe today?"

Stella paused, confused by the statement and wondering if somehow Ariel knew about the purple words. Then she remembered their texts last night. "Oh . . . it's nothing worth talking about."

Ariel pointed at Stella's face. "You have the worst poker face. Actually, you have *no* poker face. As you said the words, your facial expression drooped and you got sad eyes."

Stella tried to look offended, but she wasn't. Ariel knew all of

her expressions and diversion tactics. She finished her biscuit, then took a slow inhale. “Muddy vibe? Sounds gross, which is probably accurate. I didn’t sleep well.”

“Any particular reason?”

Stella nodded. Multiple reasons, but she wasn’t ready to talk about the words yet. “I burned a journal yesterday.”

Ariel’s eyebrows rose dramatically. “Like some kind of ritual? I know people burn candles and papers with messages on them to release bad energy or to cut energy cords, but you? You burned a *book*? You don’t even dog-ear the pages.” Ariel glanced out the window. “Have we slipped into an alternate universe? What was in the journal? Symbolic writings?”

Stella held up a hand, her buttery fingertips reflecting the sunlight. “Whoa, that got real woo-woo real fast. A ritual, seriously? What kind of ritual would *I* be doing? No, it was everything I’d been writing for and about Wade during the past six months. I’m over it. I’m tired of feeling connected to him, so I burned the journal in the library’s furnace.”

Ariel twisted off the cap on her water bottle and took a long drink before responding. “That’s kinda like a ritual. You were hoping to sever your connection by burning everything you wrote about him.”

Stella shrugged and wiped her fingers on a napkin. “All those words . . . burned.” *Lost forever*. And yet she still felt every one of the words vibrating inside her. Burning the journal hadn’t erased what happened from her heart. She thought of the golden words that slipped out of the furnace. **Surrender. Anew. Forgiveness.** Maybe she should start a new journal, write those three words at the top of a clean page. But that didn’t *feel* like what she was supposed to glean from them. Understanding what the words meant and how they were connected to her life had never been as confusing as the

past two days.

“How do you feel now?”

“Confused,” Stella admitted.

“Should I assume by you being a six last night that it didn’t go as planned?” Ariel asked.

Stella opened her own water bottle and took a drink. “Why can’t I get over him?”

Ariel cut her gaze over to Stella and pursed her lips. Then she toyed with the turquoise pendant hanging from her necklace. “Because you don’t want to.”

Stella choked when she tried to swallow. Drops of water dribbled from her mouth. “What?” she squawked. “Why would you say that?” She wiped her mouth with a thin napkin, tearing it in her roughness.

Ariel inhaled a slow breath and then pinned her Caribbean-blue eyes on Stella. “Now don’t get mad, but if you wanted to let it go, you would. There might be a bit of bitterness lingering inside you. I can help you get it out—”

Stella bristled. “I’m not bitter!” Then she immediately flushed with embarrassment and sagged against the seat. She thought about the older woman visiting the library yesterday—she’d been bitter for twenty years. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t yell at you. I didn’t sleep much last night.”

Ariel’s understanding smile sent a wash of guilt over Stella. “For what it’s worth, I think burning the journal was brave. It shows you’re *trying* to let go, and that’s something. You’ve been through a lot in the past four years. Leaving Memphis, losing your dad, moving home, and then spending a year with Wade, hoping he’d come through, only to realize he was . . .”

“Stringing me along the whole time? Using me and lying to me? Making me believe love was real?”

Ariel gazed out at the park as sunlight glinted off the hood of the van. "I wouldn't describe it exactly that way, but yeah. It's no wonder you've been angry and clutching reasons to stay that way."

Was she holding on to Wade . . . on purpose? The idea made her insides squirm. Being with Wade had made Stella feel alive and seen. While he hadn't been as interested in books, he'd willingly listened to her prattle on about them. He'd also praised Stella's creativity and encouraged her to write, not just in her journals, but poetry and short stories. He'd even written poetry for her. It was lousy, for sure, but it had charmed her.

The memories shot heat into her cheeks, followed by a burst of anger. Why had he bothered showering her with so much love and attention if he never planned to follow through with his promises? Stella had tucked those stupid poems into the journal, which was now a pile of ash.

Desperately needing to divert her thoughts from her ex, she glanced over at Ariel and noticed flower-shaped words spiraling around her best friend's throat like a daisy-chain necklace. **Intrigued. Romantic pursuits. Ask me out.** "Are you dating someone?"

Ariel shot a look at Stella, and her eyes narrowed. "Are you using your word magic on me?"

Stella laughed. "Are you admitting I'm right?"

Ariel sighed dramatically. "No, but I'd like to be. He's a client, though, so I don't know how it would work."

Stella's mouth dropped open. "Wait, you'd like to be dating one of your dogs?"

Ariel realized her mistake and giggled. "Wrong word. He's a *customer*. He brings in his German shepherd, Scout. He named her after a character from one of his favorite books."

"To Kill a Mockingbird?"

Ariel nodded.

"You should probably marry him. A book nerd is a solid choice."

Ariel scrunched her face. "Marry him? I'm not even sure we can make a date happen. He's really cute and nice, and he's not wearing a wedding band, but I have no idea if he's dating anyone. Plus, some married men don't wear rings. And it's not like I can slide that in without being awkward. 'Hey, a regular shampoo and cut for Scout, and are you single?' There's just not a way to segue there."

"You have his name and number," Stella said with a sly smile. "You could call him and ask him out."

Ariel gasped. "Not happening. I'd prefer it to be more organic and not force it."

Stella smirked. "You mean you'd prefer he do the asking."

Ariel reached for another biscuit. "Exactly. Want half?"

Stella nodded, and Ariel split the biscuit down the middle, handing the larger half to Stella. They sat in silence for a few moments eating.

Stella replayed tossing the journal into the fire with hope that it would free her from the connection with Wade, but if anything, she felt worse. Then she thought of the violet words that ripped an ache through her chest last night: *I fell in*. Did the words have something to do with Wade?

"You know what I love most about fairy tales?" Stella asked.

"The jewels? The crowns? Having your own princess castle?"

Stella chuckled. "All great guesses, but I love how you always know who the bad guy is in fairy tales. He's easy to recognize because he's probably wearing black or a wild cape or has arched eyebrows and an evil gleam in his eyes. But here in our world, the bad guy sometimes looks like Prince Charming, and he's charismatic, intelligent, funny, and has the perfect smile. Sometimes you think you've found the prince, but he's actually the villain." She paused.

JENNIFER MOORMAN

“Do you really think I’m the problem here with Wade?”

Ariel finished her half of the biscuit and wiped her mouth. “Honest thoughts?”

Stella braced herself and nodded.

“I’m not saying he didn’t have bad vibes and that he’s not at fault. He didn’t treat you well, that’s obvious. And the way he left you was cruel in my opinion. But now after all these months, we can see that him being gone and not contacting you is an indicator that you don’t need his kind of energy in your life. So it’s a gift, really, and if you’re still angry about it or still feeling mopey about losing him, then maybe it’s because you want to keep holding on and being angry and sad.”

Stella frowned. “Why would anyone want that?”

Sadness drifted across Ariel’s face. “That’s a good question.”



THE REST OF the day at the library passed slower than chilled cane syrup. On incredibly slow days, Stella normally dusted books, trying not to inhale the filth and microscopic debris collecting in crevices, which wasn’t as easy as it sounded. Breathing in at the wrong time could mean you sucked in a throatful of dank, dusty particles and spent the rest of the day sneezing with watery eyes.

Instead, she ran a report to see which books hadn’t been checked out recently. Sometimes books hid amid the library shelves and weren’t checked out for years. Last week she found a book that hadn’t left the library since February 1988. Books like that had to be weeded out, a twinging liberation. Stella cringed at the idea of getting rid of books, but space in the library was precious, and how could they make room for new books if they never weeded out the ones that had frozen in place?

Thankfully she and Arnie had creative ways of finding homes for the weeded titles. They advertised for people to come pick through the free books or sold books for fundraisers both for the library and other local activities. It amazed Stella how a book could have sat on a shelf for a year with no interest, yet it might be the first one snagged in a giveaway. She imagined the rehomed books trembling with excitement on their way to being loved and enjoyed again after feeling forgotten for so long.

After a few hours of weeding, Stella leaned her head against the edge of a shelf. When she closed her eyes, Ariel's voice sounded in her mind. Discomfort spread an ache to her chest area, giving her a feeling of indigestion. Could heartburn *literally* make her heart ache? Or was it just the bacon from this morning?

After all these months, how was it possible that she still had heart spasms because of Wade? Their time together was limited, with this demanding job and caring for his kids, every time they'd seen each other felt exciting. The way he hugged her like he never wanted to let go. The way they snickered like there was always a secret they couldn't wait to share. She *missed* feeling buoyant, missed the anticipation of the next kiss. Why was it easier to remember the heart-lifting moments and ignore the truth?

Shame burned through her. Wade was long gone and the only thing stopping her from truly letting him go was her. She rubbed her fingers against her breastbone. Ariel would say that Stella's heart chakra was out of alignment or needed "to be cleansed." A defibrillator box hung on a nearby wall. Could the paddles shock all the gunk from her heart, including stubborn emotions that she may or may not be allowing to linger? She could hear Ariel's voice in her head: *That is most definitely not the proper way to cleanse your heart.*

Fire hadn't worked. Lightning wasn't going to fix her. So what would? Ariel would say to try meditating and breathing. Breathing

she could do, but Stella meditated about as well as she spoke Italian. In fits and starts. Poorly.

“Hey, kiddo,” Arnie said, startling her from her thoughts. “The knitting club rescheduled. Why don’t you call it a night? You look beat.”

“Thanks, Arnie,” Stella said with a sigh. “Just what a girl wants to hear.”

“I thought women wanted honesty,” he teased.

“Pfft,” she said. “Who told you that nonsense?” He slipped his arm around her shoulders and gave her a squeeze. “I know what you mean. I do feel a bit worn down. I’ll take you up on that offer and head home”—she glanced at her cell phone—“Half an hour early. You sure you can close up without me?”

His expression said, *Are you kidding me?* “Is a heffalump pink?”

“Does a woozle leave tracks in the snow?” she countered.

Arnie smiled at her. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Stella grabbed her keys from the counter where she’d tossed them earlier and walked to her car parked behind the library in the first row, fourth space, to the right of the library’s exit. Same as always. She drove through town with a persistent burn in her chest and wondered if she had any antacids at home. After pulling into the garage, she grabbed for her purse, but it wasn’t there. She stared in confusion for a moment, then checked the floorboard and the narrow area between the passenger seat and the car door—as if it would even fit there. Her searching fingers found a pen, a rubber band, and a lonely, fragile cheese puff. She climbed out of the car to give herself a different vantage point but fisted her hands on her hips. Nothing but cracking leather seats. She retraced her steps in her mind and saw her purse sitting beneath the circulation desk. It would take her less than fifteen minutes to drive back across town and grab it.

THE CHARMED LIBRARY

She called Arnie as she drove. Thankfully she kept her cell phone with her while she worked. When he didn't answer, she left a message. Even though the library's rear parking lot was empty when she returned, Stella parked in her usual spot.

On the lot beside the library sat a bungalow where most of the head librarians had taken residence since it was built in the early 1900s. Arnie had convinced the town to let him purchase the home, and for as long as Stella could remember, it had been his.

Arnie's most extravagant possession in an otherwise humble life was parked in front of his cottage—an inherited 1955 silver BMW 503 convertible.

All the lights were off inside. Arnie never went to bed before midnight, and most evenings he stayed up well into the wee hours. There was no way he was sleeping already. He must still be inside the library. Stella jingled the keys on her key ring until she found the fat-headed gold key that unlocked the back door.

Her assumption that Arnie was still inside was validated when the beeping of the alarm didn't start as soon as she opened the door. The only light still illuminating the library dangled high above the circulation desk, spotlighting the circular space like an actor in a play, leaving the rest of the stage in darkness.

"Arnie?" His name echoed through the empty library, returned to her, and circled around her shoulders.

She squatted behind the desk and reached for her purse. It seemed to jump into her hands, saying, *I thought you'd left me here!* She shouldered the bag and stood. The burning sensation in her chest intensified, and Stella gripped the edge of the counter. A small pool of liquid, a vivid purple, rose up through the desktop as though a fountain had burst inside the wood. Just as they had last night, words emerged from the glowing goo, forming solid letters. Violet roots stretched out from the words and wrapped around objects on

the desktop as the fire in her blood intensified. Her hands became clammy, and Stella swayed with nausea.

The words **love once** undulated on the desk, and as soon as Stella spoke them aloud, the blistering in her chest lessened. She steadied herself and swallowed, thankful she hadn't barfed on the desk. She lifted a trembling hand to her forehead and inhaled a slow, deep breath.

The journal was at home. Would the pain return if she didn't write down the words immediately? She quickly said, "I'll write you down when I get home, I promise." Seeming to understand, the words unwrapped their purple tendrils and skittered off the countertop, disappearing into the dark library.

Stella drew in another breath and rubbed her fingertips across the left side of her chest. What was happening to her?

Laughter drifted across the foyer. She glanced toward the vault door on the opposite side of the room. The door to the antiquities archives stood ajar, and more laughter—no, *giggling*—tumbled out the open doorway. Stella started walking toward the sound but hesitated. Arnie *never* giggled, and it was a woman's voice.

Chapter 3

Blue Sky Valley boasted a history dating back past the American Revolution, and many unusual, historical, and unique items and books had been tucked into a spacious, separated, and sealed section beneath part of the library. Built into the limestone, the solid walls had withstood several natural disasters over the years, and the archives remained a fortress of knowledge and artifacts.

Stella followed the sound of laughter and voices toward the vault door, which was partially open at the top of the stairs, but it shouldn't have been unless Arnie was down there. She tugged on the door's metal handwheel, opening it wider. She stood, listening, but silence greeted her. Had she imagined the laughter?

"Arnie?" she called in a voice quieted by unease swelling inside her. Smoky-gray words poofed out of the open space: **Apprehension. Fear. Anxiety.**

Were the words a warning? Was there a reason to be uneasy about the archives tonight?

Stella tiptoed down the stairs, breathing in the scents of earth,

old parchment, and tanned leather. At the bottom of the staircase, she saw a lamp burning at the far end of the room. Was Arnie researching? She took two steps into the dimly lit archives and shivered. Laughter swept down the nearest aisle. But it wasn't Arnie's laugh. It belonged to a female. Had Arnie invited a *lady friend* into the archives? She froze, wondering if she should turn around and pretend she never found Arnie in an awkward situation, but curiosity propelled her forward.

Glowing, typewriter-font words slipped out of the shadows and floated across the shelves, then across a World War II uniform hanging in a display case. **Borrowed Time. Temporary. Please stay.** The last phrase tightened Stella's throat. More voices drifted out and quivered around her.

"Arnie?" she whispered.

The pool of lamplight touched the tip of her tennis shoe. She gripped the edge of the nearest bookcase and peered around it. A young boy wearing an outfit made of brittle autumn leaves grinned and leaped onto a study table. He wiggled his bare toes and winked at Stella. A woman, sitting with her back to Stella, laughed; her long blond hair gleamed in the soft light. A dreadfully thin man with a nose like a toucan's beak walked toward the table as his deep voice resonated against the shelves. His white shirt ballooned around his narrow frame as he walked, and the bend-snap, bend-snap of his loping gait reminded Stella of a flamingo. Was he reciting a psalm?

The man's steady gaze stretched past the table and landed on Stella's face. Her back straightened as though she'd been electrocuted. The man stopped speaking, tucked a worn Bible against his chest, and bowed his head toward Stella, causing the blond woman to turn in her chair. The impossibly beautiful woman's skin glowed as though she'd eaten handfuls of stars. Stella had never seen anyone lovelier, and she had trouble looking directly at the woman's face.

Her eyes burned the way they did when she stared at the midday sun.

“*Ya su. Kalispèra,*” the woman said in a voice smoother than poured ink.

Is that . . . Greek? Stella’s brain struggled to translate. She and Arnie hadn’t practiced Greek in months. “Good evening?” she mumbled.

The young boy leaped from the table, leaving a glittering comet trail behind him. Stella jerked backward, tripped over her own feet, and fell, knocking her head hard on a shelf. Her vision blurred, and she crumpled against the bookcase, sliding down until she plopped on the floor like a ragdoll.

A thin face dominated by an overly large nose leaned into her swirling vision. His green, glassy eyes studied her face. “My dear lady, are you quite all right?” He turned his beaked nose away from her and called to someone over his shoulder. “Arnie, I do believe one of your characters has lost her way.”

Arnie? Stella’s vision tunneled, and then everything disappeared.



“STELLA?” ARNIE SAID as he lifted her into a sitting position. The faint glow from the lamp highlighted the creases of concern on his lined face. “Come on, kiddo. Don’t you know better than to scare an old man?”

Stella blinked. He lifted her slowly and propped her upright against a bookshelf. She touched the back of her head and winced.

“Probably gonna have a real goose egg back there. What were you doing down here? You left almost half an hour ago.”

“I forgot my purse. I found it under the front desk, but then I heard voices. Yours, I thought, and I noticed the archives door was

open, so I came down here looking for you, but I saw . . .” A cold sensation on her leg distracted her for a moment. She bent her right leg toward her and patted the back of her capris. The fabric was wet from knee to cuff. “Why are my pants wet?”

“My chamomile tea,” Arnie said. “Let’s try to stand. Slowly, now. Slowly.”

Stella grabbed Arnie’s outstretched hand, and with his help, she eased to her feet, swaying for a few seconds before her equilibrium righted itself. The book spines in her line of vision undulated like underwater kelp until she blinked a few times and refocused. A throbbing ache pounded inside her skull. “Why is your tea on my pants?”

Arnie tugged on his earlobe, looking apologetic. “I spilled it when I tried to pull a book from the shelf, and when I returned to clean it up, you were sprawled on the floor. I’m assuming you slipped on it and fell.”

Stella noticed a mop propped against the study table. She hadn’t remembered slipping on the wet floor. What she remembered was seeing three strangers in the archives. She peered around Arnie’s shoulder.

He glanced behind him before turning back to her. “How’re you feeling?”

“I feel like Wile E. Coyote after an anvil has fallen on his head.”

“Let me drive you home,” Arnie said as he hooked his hand around her elbow. He slid her purse over her shoulder and led her up the aisle and away from the study table.

Stella sighed but leaned into him. “I’m fine, Arnie. I have a headache, but I can drive.” In truth, her head throbbed so intensely that nausea surged. First the purple words and now this.

“Maybe I should take you to the ER to see if you have a concussion. Or keep you awake all night with coffee and lousy jokes.”

Stella stopped walking, forcing Arnie to stop. She inhaled a few slow breaths and peered behind them. “A few aspirin will help, but I thought I saw—There were people down here.”

Arnie frowned, causing his thick eyebrows to form an unruly bridge over his nose. “This morning? Do you mean the Wallaces? Weren’t they researching Libby’s genealogy?”

Stella shook her head, which caused her to feel like she’d been twirling round and round. She closed her eyes and swallowed another swell of nausea. When it was safe to open her mouth, she said, “No. Tonight. When I came looking for you, I saw—a boy dressed like Peter Pan. He was standing on the table, and then he jumped at me.”

Arnie’s laugh startled her. It burst out down the aisle, and the books shivered on their shelves. An antique bell in a display case vibrated, sending a low hum into the room. “You knocked yourself silly.”

She started to argue with him, but what if she’d actually fallen, knocked herself out, and created the entire scenario in her dreaming mind? Still, the brief interaction had seemed real. And what about the words she’d seen when she entered the archives? **Apprehension. Fear. Anxiety.** Were they meant to caution her regarding the people? But she and Arnie were very much alone in the archives now. If she pushed the issue about the people, she’d have to admit the words she’d seen, and that wasn’t a secret she wanted to share with Arnie.

He urged her forward out of the antiquities section and led her up the staircase to the main floor. They passed through the unlit spaces until Arnie stood at the back door and set the alarm.

He stepped onto the back stoop with her, pulled out his keys, and locked the door. “I’d feel better if you’d let me drive you home.”

The humid night air scented of blooming magnolias and cut

grass. "I'm not gonna risk barfing in your car, but thanks." She dug her car keys out of her pocket and adjusted her purse on her shoulder.

"You call me if you need anything, you hear me?"

"Yes, sir." She waved over her shoulder as she shuffled to her car. Arnie stood and watched her reverse out of the parking space and drive away. As she turned onto the main street and glanced into the rearview mirror, she saw him descend the stairs and cross the grassy lot toward his cottage.

Stella gripped the steering wheel with both hands and cranked the air-conditioning to help ease the queasiness from the pounding in her skull. *Don't barf. Don't barf. Don't barf*, she repeated as a mantra in her mind.

A half hour later when she crawled into her bed in the quiet house, she closed her heavy eyelids. Crickets chirped outside her bedroom window. Her mind created an image of a man's bulbous green eyes staring at her, calling her one of Arnie's characters. That image was followed by a young boy leaping off a table, leaving a sparkling golden trail behind him. A woman whispered words in Greek, and Stella marveled at her own imagination before she drifted off to sleep.

About the Author

Photo by Matt Andrews



Born and raised in southern Georgia, where honeysuckle grows wild and the whippoorwills sing, Jennifer Moorman is the bestselling author of the magical realism *Mystic Water* series. Jennifer started writing in elementary school, crafting epic tales of adventure and love and magic. She wrote stories in Mead notebooks, on printer paper, on napkins, on the soles of her shoes. Her blog is full of dishes inspired by fiction, and she hosts baking classes showcasing these recipes. Jennifer considers herself a traveler, a baker, and a dreamer. She can always be won over with chocolate, unicorns, or rainbows. She believes in love—everlasting and forever.



Connect with Jennifer at jennifermoorman.com

Instagram: @jennifermoorman

Facebook: @jennifermoormanbooks

TikTok: @jennifermoormanbooks

BookBub: @JenniferMoorman