

THE
Dandelion
Field

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*To God—
For inviting me to be part of your story
For waterfalls of grace
For words with wings*

CHAPTER I



Okay, Ginevieve. What's bugging you?"

Besides being called Ginevieve?

Gin's back teeth snapped together so she wouldn't be tempted to say the words out loud. Even though a side dish of sarcasm accompanied every blue plate special Sue Granger served to her customers, Gin's boss didn't tolerate it from the hired help.

"Nothing." Gin knew she sounded like a surly twelve-year-old, but she couldn't help it. It had been *that* kind of morning.

"Right." The handle of a wooden spoon found a sensitive spot between Gin's shoulder blades and dug in like a cattle prod, herding her toward the back of the diner. "You got ten thumbs today, and none of them are working right."

"Sue—"

"*Sit.*"

Gin sat.

Sue maneuvered her barrel-shaped frame into the booth and shoved a plastic coffee carafe across the table.

"When you hired me, you said you weren't going to be my mother," Gin dared to remind her.

"If I remember correctly, I also told you not to jerk my chain." Sue's top lip peeled back, revealing a row of teeth stained a delicate shade of sepia from years of smoking filterless Camels.

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Gin hadn't forgotten. And so far, out of a healthy respect for the woman who signed her weekly paychecks, she hadn't touched her chain either.

The day after her car died in Banister Falls, Gin had spotted a Help Wanted sign in the window of a diner two blocks off Main Street. The building, propped up between Eddie's Bar and an auto parts store, wore a shaggy coat of charcoal-gray paint. The tattered awning, pulled low over the windows like an old tweed cap, shielded its weathered face from the sun.

My Place. Some people might think the diner's name showed a complete lack of imagination. Or a surplus of arrogance. But the moment she'd met Sue Granger, Gin knew it wasn't either one. The hand-painted sign above the door was a victory banner. Through bits and pieces of kitchen gossip, she'd discovered that Sue had broken free from an alcohol addiction and an ex-husband who'd kicked her around instead of the dog.

Gin's own life hadn't exactly been the proverbial bed of roses, but compared to Sue's, she'd given up all whining rights. She wasn't about to claim them now.

"Really. I'm fine. But I better get back to work." Gin strove to keep her voice light. "My boss let a waitress go last week for slacking off."

"Was that the rumor?" Sue snorted. "I can deal with a person slacking off once in a while. It's stupid that gets you fired." She leaned forward, elbows on the table, hands steepled together. "Now. Tell Dr. Susie everything."

Gin couldn't. That's what was driving her crazy. She had no clue what was going on with her daughter.

Ordinarily she wasn't the kind of mother who overreacted. Besides that, she and Raine were close. They didn't keep secrets from each other. The girl left her journal lying around in plain sight. Read parts of it out loud, for goodness' sake.

Maybe she isn't happy here.

Guilt seeped in, adding another layer to the weight that had been pressing down on Gin since she'd left the house that morning.

Banister Falls, Wisconsin—population 8,112—wasn't exactly a hot spot of excitement for an eighteen-year-old girl. Or her thirty-six-year-old mother, if anyone was asking. But it was Raine's senior year, and *she* was the one who'd made Gin promise they would stay put until graduation. Even though the thought of staying in one place for more than a few months left Gin with what Raine liked to call the Turtleneck Sweater Syndrome.

Gin didn't like turtlenecks. They were uncomfortable. Tight. Like someone's hands were wrapped around her throat, cutting off her air.

And Gin needed to breathe.

"One. Two."

Gin's head snapped up and her gaze met Sue's, fascinated and terrified as to what would happen if her boss actually made it to three.

"Raine wasn't feeling good when I left for work," she blurted.

"So?"

"She said it was cramps."

Hormones. A girl's get-out-of-jail-free card.

"But you don't believe her."

"I should." Except Gin had seen the statistics on eating disorders in teenage girls. As she'd hovered outside the bathroom door, it sounded like Raine had been throwing up.

On the way to the diner, Gin had taken an inventory of the food she'd seen Raine eat over the past few days. Tuna melts for supper. A bagel with cream cheese for breakfast—the girl loved carbs—but Raine *had* turned down the slice of lemon meringue pie Gin brought home from work the night before.

Sue snapped her fingers under Gin's nose. "Hello. Still having a conversation here."

"I think she might be bulimic." There. She had said it out loud. But saying the word didn't make her feel better. Now Gin felt as if *she* were going to be sick.

"Bulimic, huh?" Sue fished a pack of Camels from the pocket of her stained apron and struck it against the side of the table in a blatant disregard for the grease-spattered No Smoking sign that divided the salt and pepper shakers.

Gin's fingers twitched. She'd quit years ago, but fear had the power to resurrect a small contingent of nostalgic, nicotine-loving cells. "Raine's always been thin, but she's never obsessed about her weight the way some girls do." She suddenly remembered that Raine hadn't asked for lunch money the day before.

"Morning sickness?"

The question slammed into Gin. Her entire body jerked from the impact. "*Sue!*"

The older woman didn't flinch. "Just a question. My first-grade teacher said there was no such thing as a stupid one."

"Except *that* one." No matter that she was speaking to her boss, Gin wasn't in the mood to be polite. "Raine wouldn't . . . She isn't even dating anyone, for Pete's sake. She has a . . . a friend. They worked together on a school project a few months ago, but that's it."

Sue opened her mouth. Closed it again.

"What?"

"None of my business."

Now it was none of her business? Gin's eyes narrowed. "Do you know something?"

"Yeah." Sue's voice was as dry as an AA meeting. "Teenage girls who claim that a guy is just a friend."

"This one is. Trust me. He's not the type that would get Raine's attention." Or hold it. Gin had met Cody Bennett once, and he could be the poster child for small-town Middle America. Clean-cut, upright, and green as a cornstalk.

“Whatever you say.”

“Raine’s a great kid,” Gin persisted. “She has goals. Dreams.”

Sue pursed her lips and blew a plume of gray smoke into the air. Shrugged. “So did we.”

CHAPTER 2



Four missed calls.

Dan Moretti frowned as he scrolled through the list of phone numbers. All from Evie Bennett and all within the past few hours.

He was about to press number one on speed dial when Hopper Jones, the youngest member of the crew, poked his head around the partition that separated Dan's sleeping quarters from the rest.

"Evie called while you were gone. Twice." Hopper's teasing smile, all but hidden under the tangle of rusty barbed wire he insisted on calling a mustache, warned Dan that the news had already circulated through the fire station.

Adrenaline spiked, heating the blood that pulsed through Dan's veins as he downloaded the information. "Did she say why?"

"That's a negative, Captain. I told her you were at an all-day training session." The smile slipped a notch. "Do you think everything is okay?"

"I'll give her a call." Dan dodged the question. "I'm heading home now anyway." He peeled off his T-shirt and waited for his friend to leave before he returned Evie's call.

She answered on the first ring. "Danny."

The slight hitch in Evie's voice was as unusual as a call to the fire station when he was on duty. "What's wrong?"

“Cody.” Evie said the one name that had the power to send Dan’s heart crashing into his rib cage. “The vice principal called and said he left the school grounds without permission right after lunch. She wanted to know if I knew about it. If he had an appointment or got sick and forgot to check in with the nurse.”

Her words funneled out in a single breath, and Dan tried to sort through them as he propped his shoulder against the locker and yanked off a boot. “Cody went home sick?”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you. I don’t know because he hasn’t come home at all.” Evie’s voice thinned, her usual calm stripped away, leaving the bare wires of her deepest fears exposed. “He missed supper and he’s not answering his cell phone. I called Sam and Ben, but they didn’t even know Cody had left early.”

“How did he get to school this morning?”

“He walked . . . but when I got home, the Jeep was gone. He must have come back for it.”

“I’ll take a drive through town.” Dan reached for his coat as adrenaline burned away the fatigue from a day spent teaching an incident command seminar at the local technical college. “Maybe he drove out to the ridge.”

“It’s February! The campground is closed for the season. Why would he go there?”

“It’s his thinking place.”

“But Cody always answers his phone . . .”

Unless.

The unspoken word pulsed in the silence between them.

Dan dragged in a breath. “Cell phone batteries die. And reception is spotty out there, so he might not know you’ve been trying to reach him. I’m sure he’ll be walking through the door any minute.”

“Okay.” Evie didn’t sound too sure.

Dan could picture her standing in front of the window in the living room, spinning her gold wedding band round and round on

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her finger. A common default whenever she was upset—as if touching a part of Max, however small, would give her courage.

Dan didn't hold it against her. The shield from his best friend's helmet, charred and misshapen from the heat of the flames, was pinned to the visor of his truck. He and Evie both had their touchstones. Their ways of keeping Max's memory alive.

He tried to think of something that would make her smile. "Did you check J. C. Penney?"

Silence followed the question, and Dan hoped she didn't think he was making light of the situation. She'd called him in for reinforcements that time too. Dan had left work and helped her search every aisle of the store. They'd finally found the missing six-year-old in a far corner of the footwear department, lining up a pocketful of plastic action figures on a bunker made from discarded shoe boxes.

"He's eighteen. He's supposed to know better."

Dan heard the shimmer of a smile in her voice and released the breath he'd been holding. "He's still a guy. Sometimes we forget. I'll call you soon—and don't worry."

"I won't."

They both knew she was lying.

CHAPTER 3



On the way home from work, Gin decided that she and Raine needed to have a little talk. She'd never been the kind of person who chose to let things simmer on the back burner.

She'd forgotten her daughter wasn't that kind of person either. Raine was perched on the edge of the couch, waiting, when Gin walked into the trailer.

Five minutes later, the piece of paper listing the warning signs of an eating disorder had been compressed to a tiny ball in Gin's hand.

"Say something," Raine whispered. "Please."

In her daughter's plea, Gin heard the echo of a conversation that had taken place when she was Raine's age.

"Say something."

"I can't believe you were that stupid."

"Mom—"

"If you keep it, you're on your own. Don't expect any help from me."

"Why would I start now?"

The words had hung in the room like an acrid cloud of smoke. Burning Gin's eyes. Clogging her lungs.

"You want to mess up your life, fine. Go ahead. But your mistake isn't going to mess up mine."

"I'm sorry." Raine buried her face in the lumpy, star-shaped

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pillow she'd made in freshman home economics, her shoulders heaving as she started to cry.

Sorry. Sorry. Sorry.

The word ricocheted through Gin's head and pulled her away from the shadowy ledge that overlooked her past. The image of her mother's face faded until she and Raine were the only ones in the room.

Gin focused on a stain on the cushion, afraid that if she opened her mouth she would say too much. Or not enough.

"Are you sure?" she finally whispered.

The pillow dropped an inch. A pair of brown eyes, rimmed in red and swollen with fear, blinked up at her.

"I took a test."

Raine began to rock from side to side, something Gin hadn't seen her do since she was a toddler. But the low, keening moan that accompanied it was new and drowned out everything else in Gin's head. The questions. The accusations. The lectures.

The denial.

Gin yanked Raine into her arms and held on tight. Smoothed away the baby-soft wisps of golden hair stuck to her daughter's flushed cheek. Absorbed another round of shock waves as Raine curled against her.

Through a glaze of tears, Gin stared at the coffee table, somehow knowing that ten, thirty, *fifty* years from now she would remember every single item spread out on its scarred surface. An English text and a book of poetry with its ruffled hedge of pink Post-it Notes that marked Raine's favorites. The flecks of silver glitter suspended in a bottle of turquoise nail polish. A journal, covered with stickers from the places they'd lived over the years.

A dozen applications from colleges across the country.

"Mom?"

Gin heard the fear in Raine's ragged whisper and knew she would

remember this moment too. She pulled Raine closer. So close she could feel the rapid beat of her daughter's heart.

Your baby's heart is already beating, Miss Lightly. Listen.

"I love you, sweetheart," Gin whispered. "And nothing, *nothing*, is ever going to change that. Whatever you decide, I'm right here with you."

The words she'd wished *her* mother had said.