

Finding Our Way *Home*

A Novel



Charlene Ann Baumbich

AUTHOR OF THE DEAREST DOROTHY SERIES

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*One of our most sacred duties
is to be open and faithful
to the subtle voices of the universe
which come alive
in our longing.*

From Eternal Echoes by John O'Donohue



Dedicated to the following Lad and Ladies of Dance:

Kenneth von Heidecke,

who lived the loss and affirmed the story

Tresa Mott,

whose willingness, encouragement, and vetting helped me get it right

Misty Lown,

whose good fruit, faith, and dedication bring my

tiny-dancer grandgirlies to the stage

Sondra Forsythe,

whose sparkling passion for dance struck my mind's eye

Kim Moss,

who teaches novices how to dance with the stars and dancers

how to take flight. You are much beloved in a little town

very near Wanonishaw.

and to

Bret and Jackie,

whose love came alive

*Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which
was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali—to
fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah:*

*“Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,
the way to the sea, along the Jordan,
Galilee of the Gentiles—
the people living in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of the shadow of death
a light has dawned.”*

MATTHEW 4:13–16

One

Sasha readjusted the multicolored shawl until it was high and tight around her neck. As she secured it in place with her palm, the tip of her long, slim index finger landed on one of the dozens of glass pearlescent beads hand-worked into the elegant crocheted garment, complete with satin trim. She repeatedly tapped the bead with her fingernail. The sound, very close to her ear, reminded her of the familiar tick of a metronome.

No, it sounds more like the ticking of clock, counting down to death by regret.

She shook her head to dismiss the dark thought and stared at the snowglobe on her side table, on which she set her ever-present cup of hot tea. It didn't matter if the outdoor temperature was twenty-five or ninety-five: "Hot tea, please. That will do." On this midsummer Saturday in Wanonishaw, Minnesota, even though it was a humid eighty-seven degrees outdoors, Sasha did not turn on the air conditioning, and still she felt a slight chill.

Pinning her eyes on the ballerina in the snowglobe, she slowly rolled the bead between her thumb and index finger, as if fine-tuning a memory on a radio dial. She rocked back and forth in the rocking chair, the only chair in the house that, for the most part, didn't hurt her back. She nearly lived in it since she'd moved back in. It had been her mom's favorite chair, the one she used to rock in while nursing Sasha.

Her mom loved to tell the story about how Sasha often fell asleep while she fed her, how she had to tap the arch of her tiny bare foot to wake her. Sasha could hear her mother's gravelly voice, see the spark in her Paul Newman-blue eyes. "You were such a tiny little bird, yet from the get-go, you were so uncommonly strong."

On the rare occasions Sasha visited home, her mother always proudly showed her the most recent clippings and photos she'd added to the latest scrapbook. She had started the scrapbooks when Sasha was a child, the program from her first dance recital leading the way. Across the top of one of the pages of that first scrapbook, in her loopy handwriting, her mother had written, "I could twirl forever! The first words out of Sasha's mouth this morning."

Quickly the scrapbooks began to document the life of an emerging professional ballerina. "Seems impossible," Sasha's mother would say, "that such a tiny little bird could grow into such a majestic swan." She'd point to the recent pictures and the lean muscles in Sasha's calves, marvel at her balance, revel in her glorious costumes and top-flight billing.

As the sound of her mother's voice faded away, the rhythm of Sasha's rocking and the roll of the bead between her fingers began to

fuse with the arpeggio of orchestra music rising within her. She closed her eyes, rested the back of her head against the support pillow, and envisioned the ballerina in the snowglobe—elegant neck extended, feet in perfect fifth position—suddenly lengthen her ankles and elevate to pointe. The dancer, a perpetual and wonderful smile on her face, floated her arms to shoulder height. She tilted her delicate head and demure eyes toward the floor, slightly stage left. At the swell of the vibrating string section, in one velvet-smooth motion, the dancer lifted her chin, elongated her neck, raised her chest upward, and leaned toward the audience as she extended her right leg high up behind her and reached her left arm forward. Only her agility, strength, and the tip of her pointe shoe on her arched left foot anchored her to the floor as she performed a stunning *penché arabesque*.

The dancer was acutely aware that the stage lights brought to life the sparkles sewn into her pink, three-quarter-length tutu, flared like an elegant fan between her legs. She rejoiced in knowing she looked as stunning as Maria Tallchief, the prima ballerina in the picture she had, as a child, tacked to her bedroom wall, right above the ballerina snowglobe she kept on her bookcase headboard.

With perfect timing, Sasha's partner's large, warm hands surrounded her waist as he lifted her like a plume readied to fill the air with poetic movement and words. Her spirit and body sailed with the rising crescendos and quieting lulls of the melody as together she and Donald soared across the stage, his strength repeatedly lifting and lowering her, the box of her pink satin pointe shoe barely tapping the floor, her tutu flaring during each quick descent of their grand *pas de deux*, and...

CRASH!

With a lightning fast series of tumultuous thuds, Sasha and her partner fell to the floor. Disoriented, Sasha darted her eyes from here to there to lock in her bearings. Excruciating pain riveted her tailbone, hip, and leg. *Please, God, don't let either of us be injured! We have three more stops this tour!*

It wasn't until her vision focused on a pair of young hands picking up china shards and the dish towel soaking up a spreading circle of tea that reality sank in, yet again. She was no longer Sasha Davis, glitterati, principal dancer at Mid-Central Festival Ballet in Boston, one of the largest and most prestigious ballet companies in the United States. She was no longer traveling the world, performing to standing ovations. She was simply Sasha Davis. A near invalid living in her deceased mother's home, the home she grew up in, with shelves full of scrapbooks in an upstairs bedroom she could neither get to nor stand to look at.

She was back in Wanonishaw, Minnesota, a town—a *life*—she'd left when, at age seventeen, she'd been accepted into Juilliard.

She put her hands on the arms of the rocker and leaned forward. The shawl slid down behind her back. "I'm sorry," she said to the top of Evelyn's head. Evelyn, nineteen, was on her knees, cleaning up the mess. "I can't believe I spilled again. How many teacups have I gone through in the two months since you've been with me?"

Evelyn looked up and chuckled. Beads of perspiration dotted her forehead, dripped off her nose. "Your share of them," she said. She carefully set pieces of china in the metal garbage can she'd brought from the kitchen. "But no worries, Ms. Davis. Your mom had so

many teacups and saucers in this house, you could break one a day, live to be a hundred and fifty, and still not run out! I haven't seen so many cups and saucers since the last time I went to the cities and dreamed about setting up my bridal registry at Macy's. I bet there isn't a china department in any store in the whole *world* that has as many unique teacups as your mom!" Evelyn swiped at the remaining puddle of tea with the towel, which she wrung out in the garbage can. She dabbed at a few drops splattered on the fringe of the nearby area rug.

Sasha noticed the way Evelyn managed, at regular intervals throughout the day, to maneuver her hand in order to catch another glimpse of her own engagement ring. At least that's what Evelyn had called it when she jutted her finger in front of Sasha's face during her interview for this dreadful job. "My *engagement* ring from my *fiancé*," she said dreamily, as if the diamond could rival one of Elizabeth Taylor's. If there was even a chip of genuine diamond in the middle of that thin band, Sasha would be surprised.

"I'll bring you another cup of tea," Evelyn said, startling Sasha as she sprang to her feet and headed toward the kitchen. "The water's still hot in the kettle," she said over her shoulder. "Sit tight for a minute."

Sit tight? After exhausting herself simply pulling the shawl from behind her, wrestling it over her shoulders, and tucking it up under her neck, Sasha slumped back in the chair. *Who would have imagined that at only age thirty-seven, that's nearly all I'd be able to do? I might as well be ninety.*

Through the window, a large bird caught Sasha's eye as he floated onto the porch rail. His blue iridescent head and bright eyes glistened in the sun. The colors, including his jet-black body, reminded her of

one of the dramatic costumes she'd worn during a solo performance in Venice. Organza, chiffon, tulle, beads, the music... She fingered a bit of the satin that trimmed her shawl, recalled the exact tiara she wore for the sequence.

The bird took a few hops, then began to bathe in the warped aluminum frying pan she'd instructed Evelyn to get rid of after the dramatic incident just days after Evelyn moved in. The next morning, when Evelyn drew the drapes, Sasha saw the old pan, its handle half-melted, on the porch railing. It was filled with water and a handful of glass marbles. She opened her mouth to chastise Evelyn for once again not following her instructions, but before she could emit a sound, a bright small bird, its head the color of coral, landed on the handle, hopped to the rim of the pan, and took several delicate drinks of water. As soon as he was gone, a small, brilliant, gold, black, and white bird took his place and broke out in song. *Such beauty. So many colors.*

Such tiny little birds.

When she looked up, Evelyn was smiling, nodding her head in that annoyingly knowing way of hers.

Ever since the pan first appeared on the rail, a constant parade of birds drank and bathed, splashed and vied for space. The expensive birdbath Sasha sent her mother one Mother's Day—a departure from the usual teacup and saucer—sat empty in the middle of the yard. Utterly entertaining, these tiny dancing birds. And now, a large yellow-eyed one, swooping in like the handsome Prince Siegfried in *Swan Lake*. A few bars of Tchaikovsky's glorious score played in Sasha's head, then quickly faded. By the time the grackle, which Evelyn had identi-

fied for her, was done with its raucous bath, the pan was nearly splashed empty.

Just like my life.

“Time to refill the pan again,” Evelyn said, as she settled a new teacup and saucer into their usual spot. “Funny how much the birds love that old thing. Wonder why? Maybe the sun warms the metal, which warms the water.”

“Maybe,” Sasha said, careful to sound like she didn’t care, which she didn’t.

“Or maybe it’s the marbles. I read birds are attracted to shiny glass, which is why I put the marbles in there.”

“Maybe.” Sasha frowned, shook her head, pursed her lips. “Perhaps I should have someone create a cement birdbath decorated with all the shards of glass I’ve produced lately.”

“Just to remind you, Ms. Davis,” Evelyn said, positioning herself right in front of Sasha, encroaching on her personal space by nearly standing on her toes, “you won’t be in that rocking chair forever, you know. Allowing yourself to get all pity-partied up just saps the energy your body needs to mend itself.”

Sasha studied the large, big-boned young woman standing before her, who, hands on her hips, boldly studied her right back.

Sasha’s chin jutted slightly upward as she felt her anger rise. “Who do you think you are?”

Evelyn backed up a step.

“Not only my aide, but a mind reader too? My cheerleading squad? My *shrink*? May I remind you that I pay you to assist me. To do what I *instruct*,” Sasha said, her eyes momentarily diverting to the

frying pan she'd *instructed* Evelyn to get rid of. "I do not pay you—and I pay you well—to lecture me or to override my decisions."

Evelyn straightened, letting her hands fall to her sides. "Yes, Ms. Davis, you do pay me well, and I thank you. I'm sorry if I overstepped my boundaries. I'll try to do better next time. It's just that I hate to see you get so down on yourself." She bit her lip. "If there's nothing else you need"—Evelyn paused, waited until Sasha shook her head—"I have some errands to run. Maybe you can enjoy a nap while I'm gone."

This wasn't the first time Evelyn had reminded Sasha that she was cranky when she was tired. At least this time she was more subtle about it.

"I'll be back around four-thirty to prepare dinner. And again, I'm sorry. My mom's often told me I have a short circuit when it comes to boundaries." Evelyn reached back, grabbed her long blond ponytail, and twirled it around her index finger. "But my fiancé says he adores my spunky attitude. I guess I have to figure out a happy medium, or where to be what or who or how. Or something like that." She shrugged and grinned. "Sure you don't need anything before I go?"

Sasha shook her head and flicked her fingers in dismissal. Shortly after she heard the back door close, she saw Evelyn whizzing down the street on her bicycle. Her pink Life is good-brand backpack clung tightly to her body. Her ponytail sailed behind her like a kite tail. *Isn't everyone supposed to wear a helmet?*

But what was the point of playing safe in life? Look where it had gotten Sasha. All those years. All that practice. All that pain.

As much as that girl annoys me, why is it she's right about nearly everything? Pity party, indeed. Knock it off!

Sasha sucked in her stomach and tried to flatten her back to the chair. Although the action caused her to grimace, she straightened her right leg and lifted it parallel to the floor. She pointed her toe, rotated her foot to the left, then to the right. She pointed her toe again, studied the line of her slim leg beneath her long rayon skirt, thought about all the times she'd stood at the barre while studying the stretch of her legs in the mirror, the angle of her arms, the tilt of her head and carriage. She shook her head, closed her eyes, and repeated the exercise with her left leg. She sucked in her breath and tried to will herself to lift both legs at once, an action that hurt so badly it made her whimper.

After five months, her body still wasn't ready for that much rigor. The doctor told her to let the pain be her guide, not to rush the process lest she risk setting back her healing. Absolutely no pushing herself until physical therapy began. But how could she sit there and do nothing? The life of a dancer was fraught with aches and pains, twitches and bruises. One learned to bandage up, ice down, and gut it out. Doing nothing wasn't acceptable!

Then a sickening thought struck her. Pain wasn't a guide. Pain had become her best friend. At this point in her messed-up life, without the pain, she would have nothing. Nothing at all.

She squeezed the chair arms, pushed her spine into the back cushion, and tried to lift both legs. Again and again and again she tried, until at last she broke into sobs, not an ounce of strength left in her body.

Two

Evelyn Burt twisted her ponytail while she stood in line at her grandfather's butcher shop. It was Saturday and the place was packed. Her grandpa was in fine form, joking and weighing, slicing and winking. Betty, his new wife, to whom he'd been married less than a year, rang up purchases. She didn't often help out in the shop, but when she did, Grandpa Burt smiled even more than usual.

"What do you need, Sweet Cakes?" he asked when he called out number forty-seven and Evelyn handed him her ticket.

"Two of your best T-bone steaks, a half pound of Lorraine Swiss cheese, two chicken breasts, and a hug."

"Get yourself around here, honey!"

She scooted behind the counter, saying "excuse me" several times and stepping on one gentleman's toes before diving into her grandpa's open arms.

He kissed her on the cheek, said he was sorry he couldn't visit, and that she and that fiancé of hers should stop by for dinner. "How about... Betty? We busy next Tuesday?"

Betty shook her head, nodded, and smiled at Evelyn.

“It’s a date. Well, actually, I can’t speak for Jorden, but I’ll be there, even if he can’t make it. They’ve been changing his work schedule around.”

“Think old what’s-her-name would like to come too?”

“Gramps!” Evelyn blushed, which she was not prone to doing. Of course he was kidding by referring to Ms. Davis like that, but nonetheless... “Lower your voice please, Gramps. You want me to get fired?” she whispered through her teeth. “If anyone heard you and word gets back to her, I’m finished. I’m always in enough trouble with her without that. In any case, I seriously doubt she’ll come. In fact I am one hundred percent sure of it. But I’ll extend the invitation anyway. It’s nice of you to think of her. I’ll let you know tomorrow about both Jorden and Ms. Davis.” She moved back around to the customer side of the counter.

She watched as her grandpa selected two of the choicest steaks. They both knew that for Ms. Davis price was never an issue and that Evelyn would be eating one of them. He sliced the cheese super thin, just the way Ms. Davis liked it, and wrapped two chicken breasts. Betty rang up the charges to Ms. Davis’s account and said she’d see Evelyn on Tuesday. Evelyn tossed the meat in the green bag she kept folded up in her backpack. Today it contained two frozen bottles of water she nabbed out of the freezer before she left the house to keep the meat cold. She stuffed it all back in her backpack, then threw her grandpa a kiss.

Next stop: Jorden’s! She couldn’t stay but a minute, since the deadly combo of fresh meat, stifling heat, and the sun beating down needed

to be taken seriously. But a quick kiss would be better than no kiss. Plus, now she needed to invite Jorden to her grandpa's next Tuesday.

As she traveled the mile to Jorden's family's house, using her arm to signal her turns, she thought about the way Ms. Davis had reprimanded her. Evelyn was grateful for the job and decided she would have to try harder to not always say what she was thinking.

All her life, she'd just blurted things out, which had gotten her into her share of trouble, especially in high school. Her mom said it was just the way she was wired, but her dad spent a lot of time raking his fingers through his hair when they argued. She was as stubborn as he was.

But when, two weeks after her high school graduation, she blurted out that she was engaged *and* that she was no longer interested in going to college, at least not now, her dad blew a gasket. She'd already been accepted at three of her four top college picks. She was only nineteen and her fiancé a mere twenty.

"We're not getting married for at least two years," she told her folks, which helped settle them a little.

But still her parents, both teachers, admonished her. "Get an education, Evelyn!" her dad eventually bellowed.

Evelyn stood firm, which they should have been used to by now. "I need to get out of here and see a little of the world before I settle down."

Get out of here? Where was she going if not to school, they wanted to know.

Well, nowhere, really. But she needed to make her own stand in life. And she was in *love*!

Shortly thereafter, an inspired vision popped into her head, and she began to design her own business card.

EVELYN BURT'S HELPING HANDS, HELPING *YOU*.

NO ODD JOB TOO ODD.

She included her phone number and the word "REFERENCES."

"Mom, Dad," she said when she showed them the first draft of the card, "you know I'm a hard worker, right?"

They could not disagree.

"Grandpa," she said one day when she stopped in the shop, "okay if I use you as a reference too?"

Of course.

Taking advantage of her artistic talents, which her art teachers had always lavishly praised, she drew a picture of her own hands reaching toward the readers of the card. She took a photo of the drawing, then used a graphics program to incorporate it into her design. She bought Avery business-card stock and printed the cards herself. She tacked the cards on bulletin boards around town, set some on the counter in the butcher shop, and knocked on doors throughout her neighborhood.

Immediately her phone began to ring. More requests poured in than she at first thought she would be able to handle. But never short on determination or lacking in enthusiasm for a new experience, she handled them anyway.

She mowed yards, ran errands, and delivered groceries. She helped clean an attic, drove a senior citizen to her sister's house in the cities, baby-sat, painted a cupboard, dug a trench, sorted weekly pills into pill containers for Gerald McCarthy, cleaned gutters, washed

windows, and trimmed Doris K. Phibbs's disgusting toenails with a giant toenail trimmer. When she didn't know how to do something, she looked it up on the Internet.

Aside from the splurge on her Life is good backpack she found at T.J. Maxx ("How perfect is *this*, Jordan!?"), she saved her proceeds for her upcoming great adventure, whatever and wherever that would be.

But mostly, she saved for her wedding.

Then one day she saw the ad in the newspaper for a temporary live-in aide, no name mentioned. "Errands and light cooking. Some personal care. Room and board included. Duration uncertain. Only females need apply."

Maybe she couldn't yet afford to get out of town for her adventure, but she could at least get out of her parents' house. A step in the right direction. She loved her folks dearly, but a girl had to *live*.

In her usual impulsive style, without giving it another thought, she called the number.

"Sasha Davis," the voice said.

"Whoa! Is this really *the* Sasha Davis?" She heard the clearing of a throat. "Well hello, Ms. Davis. Evelyn Burt here, calling about your ad in the paper."

"Burt," Ms. Davis said, her voice flat. "Any relation to Burt Burt the butcher?"

"Yes, ma'am. His granddaughter. Bob, my dad, is Burt Burt's son."

The line was quiet for a long while, which piqued Evelyn's curiosity. She wondered if being a Burt was good news or bad news to Ms. Davis.

"How old are you, Evelyn?"

“Nineteen.”

“I certainly did not expect someone so young to respond.”

“Well, life is just like that, isn’t it? Full of surprises.” Evelyn delighted in life’s surprises and therefore assumed everyone did the same.

“No college for you?” Ms. Davis sounded disapproving.

“Not right now. I’d like to experience a little independence before I get married. My fiancé agrees that it will be good for both of us to have our own lives before we wed. Still, we just can’t bear to be apart, not now.”

“Fiancé? At *nineteen*?” Ms. Davis sounded incredulous.

“Ms. Davis, love is as love does, and believe me, our love *does*. I am a woman who knows my own mind. Always have. I have a goal: to birth two children by the time I’m twenty-five, and to always and forever be in love with my one and only husband. Somewhere in there, a college degree will be mine too. I’m physically strong, wholly reliable, have an entrepreneurial spirit, come with countless references, and I’m very interested in this position. I can’t imagine a more wonderful opportunity than to spend time both serving and getting to know *the* Sasha Davis. You do know you are the most famous person to launch out of Wanonishaw, right? And that people used to report their rare Sasha Davis sightings when you came to town to visit your mom? Well, okay, maybe we didn’t always actually see *you*, but we’d hear you were here, and one time we saw that limo! And by the way, I am sorry about both the loss of your mother and your injury.”

The line was silent for a long while.

“Ms. Davis, are you still there?”

“Yes. Yes, I am. You are a lot to take in, Evelyn.”

“I imagine I am.”

“Yes, well... When might you be available for an interview?”

“I can come right now!”

“Oh, no. That’s impossible. I need time to... Today won’t work. How about tomorrow morning at nine?”

“I’ll see you then.”

“Don’t you need my address?”

“Ms. Davis, everyone in Wanonishaw knows you’re living in your mom’s old house while you recuperate. In fact, everyone in Wanonishaw knows pretty much everything about you and everyone else.”

At exactly nine the next morning, Evelyn rang Sasha Davis’s doorbell. She waited a moment, then rang it again. Perhaps Ms. Davis couldn’t *get* to the door. She cracked it open and poked her head in.

“Ms. Davis? Evelyn Burt is here!” she announced with the flair of a grand *ta-da!*

“I’ve been saying come in. I guess you couldn’t hear me,” Evelyn heard from down the hall.

Although Evelyn remembered Genevieve Davis, Sasha’s mother, from church, she’d never been inside the house. The entryway was dark. Dark wood. Old wood. Rich looking. She didn’t recall them having money. She cast her eyes from one piece of furniture to the next, peeking around corners, stopping a moment to stare at the old console radio with brown push buttons. She’d seen one like it before

in an antiques store. She loved wandering around in those musty smelling places, viewed them as the caretakers of millions of stories that fired her creative juices. On that sighting, she'd rested her fingers on the buttons, wondering how many others had done the same throughout time. She was going to push one of those buttons, curious how the click sounded, but the owner of the store had glared at her, so she put her hands in her pockets.

The temptation now to push one of these radio buttons was strong, but she restrained herself by clasping her hands together, in case Ms. Davis could see her. Evelyn hadn't laid eyes on her yet. It was so dark, she could be anywhere.

"In here," came the voice. "Keep walking straight back, please. I'm in a small room near the kitchen. You'll see me."

Evelyn couldn't get over how dark everything was. Every drape pulled tight. Depressing, if you asked her. All this dreariness would be difficult to live in. The walls could use a good coat of yellow or cream, maybe even a mint green. She'd watched enough HGTV—research for the business, she told her folks—to know just how to perk the place up. Maybe she could talk Ms. Davis into letting her have a go at redecorating.

It never occurred to her she wouldn't get the job and move right in.

It never occurred to Evelyn Burt she wouldn't get any and everything she wanted out of life, which she told Ms. Davis. And right now, she wanted this job, which she told her too.

Ms. Davis looked like she might be ready to say no, so Evelyn kept right on talking. She told her she could not only type—well, *keyboard*, she explained—but could do so with blazing accuracy and speed. Then she showed Ms. Davis her business card.

“You designed this yourself?”

“Yes, ma’am. Original artwork, too.”

“You could handle correspondence, then?”

“I can handle anything, including cooking a mean steak on the grill.”

Ms. Davis raised her eyebrows. “Can you maintain confidentiality, Evelyn?”

“Absolutely. I’m a talker, but I’m not a gossip. You can ask anyone who knows me. That is the gospel truth.”

Ms. Davis stared at her, unblinking. She rearranged her beautiful shawl, which seemed completely out of place to Evelyn. She shifted in her rocker and fingered a stack of mail on her side table.

Evelyn could, Ms. Davis told her, begin moving personal belongings into the room at the top of the stairs, to the left. She should consider the upstairs bathroom her private bathroom. She could have flex hours off as prearranged and agreed upon. As she told Ms. Davis, “I am in love, Ms. Davis, and I take that commitment seriously.” But in general, she needed to be available during the day and always present at night. And she needed to maintain confidentiality. Unless otherwise instructed, nothing that took place in the house moved outside the walls. Period.

Evelyn gave her head one firm nod, and just like that, she’d struck out on her own.



Already, she thought, thrusting out her arm to turn into Jordan’s driveway, she was becoming more self-aware and mature, and in good ways. For instance, no matter how perfect or brilliant the concept, she

now understood it was not a good idea to go against your boss. Exhibit Number One: the impromptu frying-pan birdbath.

Sure, it was old-fashioned looking, an inspired idea, and the birds' favorite—plus, it had the whole recycling thing going for it. But she'd gone against her boss's wishes by a) keeping it after the explosive incident, even though she'd been asked to dispose of it, and b) putting it right in front of Ms. Davis's face, which she thought would be soothing.

Sometimes I am too inspired for my own good.

When she returned to Ms. Davis's house on Fourth Street—*her* new abode, she reminded everyone—she'd have to remember to take that pan off the porch rail and toss it in the garbage.

By the time she knocked on Jorden's front door, she had also decided that as soon as she arrived home, she'd ask Ms. Davis if there was anything else she'd done since moving in that Ms. Davis would like undone.

And she would apologize.

But first, she needed to kiss Jorden's wonderful crooked grin of a mouth, and there it was right there, waiting for her, right between those magnificent dimples.