In Safe Hands

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CHAPTER ONE

'So, which one do you want to look at first today?'

Meg, her realtor, clicked off her smartphone and thrust a couple of prospectuses onto Caro's lap. 'There's only this new one on the market. But I thought perhaps I'd take you to look at the one on Hilltop Road again. It's come down in price.'

They were parked in the town square outside Meg's office. Caro glanced at the old Meeting House with its white clapboard siding and a sign that declared it had been standing since 1798. She loved Connecticut's old buildings. There was something about the history of the town that gave her connection to her British roots.

Outside, the afternoon air was hot and heavy, but the chill from the air-conditioning inside the car made Caro shiver as her bare legs brushed against the cream leather upholstery of the swish Mercedes. She watched the woman impatiently strum her painted fingernails on the steering wheel. Caro couldn't blame Meg for being exasperated. For nearly two years, she'd looked at houses, unsure of what she was searching for but hopeful she'd know when she saw the right one. Caro understood she wasn't the ideal house hunter; she was still trying to find herself.

She tucked a strand of chestnut-colored hair behind her ears and cast her eyes over the house details sitting on her knee. Meg fiddled with the radio and found the Beatles channel. As she listened to the melancholy strains of *Yesterday*, Caro tried to remember the number of times she'd sat in Meg's passenger seat. A year is long when you're looking for a new beginning.

'I remember I hated Hilltop Road—it had a bad atmosphere. I'd never live there, even if it is going cheap,' she replied. She waved a glossy folder blazoned with the words *Antique Home Ready for New Beginnings*. 'This one looks promising, though. What do you know about it?'

'It just came on yesterday, and there's already a lot of interest. But, I have a good feeling about it, so keep thinking positive thoughts,' Meg advised as she tapped the address into her GPS. Then she shoved the car into gear, jerking Caro's head back against the headrest, and they hurtled out of the parking lot like a supersonic jet racing down a runway. 'If you like it, you'll have to move fast,' the woman yelled over the sound of wind rushing through the car window. 'I've never heard you say the word *promising* before. Let's do this!'

Thirty minutes later, after listening to Meg's rant on the importance of putting the past behind her and moving forward, Caro stepped out of the realtor's car in front of a clapboard house. Nestled in a dip in the landscape, surrounded by rolling fields and woodland, the colonial home was white with midnight navy shutters. The driveway was an old, rocky road that continued out of sight into the trees. A sign over

the front door reading Est.1800 suggested stability and permanence, which Caro so desperately yearned for. Antique windowpanes sat four over four, with tiny air bubbles in the glass that seemed to wink welcomingly in the sunlight. It was somewhere resting solidly in the past, but the present flew all around.

The wind murmured through the maple trees, and the languid lapping of water from the brook yards across the field floated in the air—for the first time in over a year of searching, Caro wasn't disappointed. She felt a bubble of excitement flutter in her stomach and a deep sense of belonging that she hadn't felt in a very long time.

'It's perfect, isn't it?' Meg gushed, looking around breathlessly. 'I think this could be it! It's got all the right karma. I think you're finally ready, too.'

'You could be right,' Caro said with a broad smile. 'I can't wait to look inside.'

*

Picking up her teacup, Caro leaned back in a garden chair, listening to intermittent chirruping as birds flew back and forth to the birdfeeder hanging from the branch of a nearby dogwood tree. It was mid-October, and there was a chill in the air, but red maple leaves shimmering in the sunlight made it seem warmer.

By now, she'd learned that in years gone by, the field on the other side of the fence had been part of a

farm and orchard. Only two ancient crabapple trees remained. They sat side by side at the edge of the meadow, their lichen-covered branches interlaced in a loving embrace like an old married couple never wanting to part. Looking at them, Caro remembered when she and Mike had been that pair. But then he'd disappeared with his suitcase, walking away from his family and the life they'd built together. She couldn't understand what had gone wrong. Mike was the only man she'd ever loved.

They'd both been on a flight from London to New York when they'd met; she was in her thirties and Mike in his forties. It had been her regular route as an air stewardess, and as an American financial analyst with an office in London, it was a frequent one for him, too. On the fifth time they crossed the Atlantic together, he asked her out. He took her for a fancy dinner in New York, and things progressed quickly after that. But it had been far too fast for her family; they were unhappy when he whisked her off to live in America. *You hardly know him ...It's too far away ... What will happen if something goes wrong? You'll be all alone,* they'd said.

Steam curled from the hot tea into the morning air. Caro smiled wistfully at the familiar clink of the porcelain cup as she placed it back on its saucer, thinking of her home and family across the ocean. She thought of how her mother had set out the old-fashioned china tea set every Sunday for tea. People didn't use those cups these days, but she did. After her mother passed away, she'd kept the Royal Albert bone china, using a primrose-patterned cup and saucer every morning, feeling a connection to her past.

Her divorce had left her shattered, brokenhearted, and unable to imagine a future. Now, simple things like her early morning tea routine helped ground her as she navigated the delicate balance of healing and searching for strength to move forward, far from her native land.

Four deer, two mothers and two young ones, were grazing quietly beneath the apple trees, their thickening coats the color of the autumn leaves that fluttered around in the air like golden confetti. The animals rummaged away, not paying her any attention, intent on fattening themselves up for the cold winter months ahead. There'd been a downpour in the night, and as the sun warmed the ground, she breathed in scents of damp earth and autumn, watching as a chipmunk darted back and forth into the wood pile, carrying acorns to add to its winter hoard. All around, a sense of resilience wrapped her in a warm blanket. She hugged herself, happy to know she'd at last found the perfect home—somewhere safe.

She was sitting quietly reflecting on her good fortune when, without warning, the squeal of a vehicle careening into the driveway at breakneck speed rudely shattered the tranquil scene. The deer turned and fled, their white tails bobbing up and down, signaling imminent danger. Startled too, Caro jumped up from her seat.

'Are you the divorced woman who's just moved in?' The words fired like pellets into the early morning air from the open window of an SUV driven by a petite woman of about fifty. Caro was stunned to see the diminutive gatecrasher jump out of the car, almost

tripping over in her hurry to reach her side. She thought that perhaps the scantily dressed visitor, wearing a nightie and fluffy slippers, was on her way home from an adult sleepover party and was on a recruitment mission for new members. She stared at the caller with her mouth wide open, so taken aback by the question that she just nodded in the affirmative. The woodland drums had been busy announcing her marital status to the far-flung community. It wasn't the welcome wagon she'd been expecting.

'I need your help,' the woman gasped. Her eyes, encircled with smudged mascara, darted back and forth from her car to Caro. Fat tears started to drip down her face. Caro reached into her slouchy flannel pajama pocket, pulled out a tissue, and handed it to her.

'Do you need to use my phone? Is someone hurt?' Caro, despite her initial shock, was now concerned. 'I'm Caro, by the way. Are you a neighbor?'

'Yes, I am. I live at number ten. It's up the hill and around the bend, the colonial with the split rail fence.' The woman nodded vaguely in the opposite direction. She raked her fingers through her uncombed, blonde hair. 'I don't know if I can go back there,' she sniffed.

Caro became alarmed, thinking now that maybe the woman was the victim of a home invasion or something equally frightening and that her first impression of the bizarre caller was way off track.

'Come in. You're safe here. I'll lock the door; we'll call the police, and I'll make you a nice cup of tea.'

She put her arm around the woman's shoulders and almost shoved her through the door.

‘No, no … I don’t need the police … I need your advice,’ the woman sobbed.

*

Caro placed a cup of tea in front of her odd guest. Rivers of makeup trickled down the woman’s cheeks, making her look even more disheveled than when she’d first arrived. But patience and empathy were something that Caro had in bucket loads—diplomacy had been ingrained in her by her father, who had worked for the Foreign Office, and everyone always said she was the one to go to in a crisis. She just sat and waited as the woman wept, unable to utter a word.

‘Perhaps we should start at the beginning,’ Caro said eventually. She reached over and touched the woman’s hand. ‘What’s your name?’ she asked gently.

‘Jeanie, Jeanie Blackman. My husband worked on your floor.’ She hiccupped. ‘He’s in construction.’

Caro looked down at the wide planks of chestnut that stretched the length of the galleried kitchen and into the dining room beyond. They mirrored the rich color of the falling leaves outside the windows and were one of the features of her new house that Caro liked best. She loved their aging patina and imagined the stories that lingered within the heavy timber.

‘Nice to meet you, Jeanie,’ she said. ‘I like your husband’s work.’

‘Hmph!’ Jeanie snorted. ‘I don’t know if I like anything about him right now.’ She wiped her nose on the back of her hand and sniffed loudly.

‘Do you want to tell me about it?’ Caro asked gently.

Jeanie fiddled with the tie of her pink nightdress, and her eyes widened. ‘Oh my God! I don’t know how I got here … I don’t even know you.’ She looked down at her furry Ugg slippers. ‘You must think I’m a lunatic coming here dressed like this. I’m sorry, I should go.’ She stood up and made for the door.

‘Well, I did think you might have a screw loose,’ Caro teased, trying to deflect Jeanie’s embarrassment. ‘What’s your husband done?’

‘He’s having an affair. And he’s gone and bought a bike and prances around in Spandex. He’s never been very athletic. He was a bit on the chunky side, to be honest. Then, in the spring, something happened; I’ve no idea what triggered it. He was like one of those wind-up toys when the key gets stuck, buzzing like crazy. Suddenly, all he talked about was getting fit.’ She sat down with a thud.

Caro shook her head in wonder as Jeanie leaned on the table, words pouring out of her mouth in a torrent. She couldn’t help thinking that Jeanie sounded like a Chatty Cathy doll.

‘I never thought anything about it at first. I was so proud of him when he lost all that weight. Then, he stopped coming home straight after work. When I asked him where he’d been, he told me he was drinking with his pals. He’s cut his hair in a stupid style and has bought new clothes. And he goes out cycling all the time, or so he says. I think he’s with her.’ She gasped suddenly. ‘Or do you think it could be a *him*?’ The woman’s eyes opened wide. ‘June

Rizzio's husband left her for a man. Oh my God, I hadn't thought of that until now!'

Jeanie reached out to grab her, her painted fingernails needling into the skin on Caro's arm like a puppy's sharp teeth. Caro gently edged her arm away and took a gulp of tea to steady herself while she absorbed the information. She'd never met anyone quite like Jeanie before.

'So, you suspect he's having an affair because he's changed his appearance and goes out a lot?' she asked. This was an odd conversation to have with a stranger. She'd never been one to share her private thoughts.

'Yes. Why else would he behave like this?'

'I don't know,' Caro shrugged her shoulders. 'I don't know him. Maybe he's having a midlife crisis, and cycling is helping.' She considered everything Jeanie was telling her, trying to diffuse the situation, but she didn't want to get involved in the marriage of people she didn't know.

'Just because I'm divorced doesn't mean I have a crystal ball into your situation. The only advice I can give you is to go home and talk to him. What's his name, by the way?'

'Rob.' Jeanie sniffed and wiped her cheek with the back of her hand. 'We had the most awful row last night. He was so angry when I accused him of being unfaithful. We've never really argued about anything before; I wish he could go back to being my cuddly bear.'

Caro cleared her throat discreetly and bit her lip to stop herself from laughing at the image of a Spandex-clad chubster forming in her mind.

‘Well, all I can say is that you both need to sit down and tell each other what you feel. There’s nothing wrong with your husband taking up new hobbies and trying to be healthy, but you should tell him if it’s making you feel insecure. I learned too late that we change and grow as we age. Understanding that and growing together is key, I think.’

The woman looked at her curiously. ‘Is that why you’re divorced?’ she asked, blowing her nose loudly.

Caro hesitated for a moment, caught up in the swell of Jeanie’s emotional venting. She debated whether she should share how her husband had fallen in love with someone else when she hadn’t been paying attention. She’d been too busy holding her family together in a foreign country while Mike traveled constantly. She’d left it too late to talk, and they’d drifted apart. Then afterward, she’d fretted about how she would survive alone and had started searching for an elusive alternative that turned out to be unpleasant.

She took a deep breath, reminding herself that she’d come here to forget and to get stronger; she didn’t want to be infected by Jeanie’s situation or pick at the scabs of her old wounds.

‘I’d been someone’s wife for so long. I need to learn how to be me again,’ she said simply. ‘I’ve found somewhere peaceful to reflect.’

‘That sounds hard,’ Jeanie said. ‘I’m not sure if I can start over by myself.’

‘It took ages to find the right place.’

‘Why didn’t you go back to England? I’m guessing you’re from there.’

‘I’m not sure where I belong anymore, and my daughter and grandchildren are here. Anyway, I …’ she trailed off, hoping the woman’s interrogation would stop. That life was in the past tense, and she was inching her way into the future.

‘How long were you married for?’ Jeanie asked.

‘Thirty years,’ Caro replied.

Jeanie gasped. ‘That’s a long time,’ she said. ‘Did I hear you’ve moved from Fairland County?’

Caro quickly saw an opening in the woman’s questioning to steer the subject back to something less personal. She chuckled, remembering the day Meg had shown her the house.

‘I have. Meg, my realtor, showed me so many homes, but none ever felt quite right. In the end, I could tell she was fed up with me. When she opened the door to the kitchen, she said that she might have to kill me if I didn’t buy this one! She was a saint to put up with me,’ she laughed.

She gazed around the farmhouse kitchen with its vaulted ceiling and custom-made carpentry, letting her new home wash away the unhappy memories that Jeanie had managed to unearth.

‘Some people say the house has healing powers, but I don’t know if I believe in that kind of mumbo-jumbo,’ Jeanie said.

‘Healing powers? That doesn’t surprise me at all,’ Caro replied, thinking that’s what had probably attracted her to the place.

‘But aren’t you lonely?’

Caro shook her head. ‘I’m not lonely or alone; this house feels safe,’ she replied. ‘It hugged me the minute I walked through the door.’

Caro noticed that the cup of tea seemed to have finally done the trick, and Jeanie was much calmer. They sat silently for a moment, and then she put her hand on the woman's arm and tapped it encouragingly.

'Go home, dear. I have a feeling everything is going to be all right.'