

Moments
We
Forget

a novel

BETH K. VOGT

PRAISE FOR BETH K. VOGT

“Vogt is paving a way for herself in the world of women’s fiction. The Thatcher sisters deal with real issues and, despite their trials, find love and friendship in the midst. The ending of *Moments We Forget* will leave readers delighted.”

RACHEL HAUCK, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

“In *Moments We Forget*, Vogt again proves she’s a master at peeling back the layers while gently navigating the dynamics of faith, family, and sisterhood. This book challenges the tough, the real, and the exquisite journey that is the life we live—shining a spotlight on the hope we cling to when all points don’t line up the way we’d first planned. I was at once encouraged and soon blown away by this book!”

KRISTY CAMBRON, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE LOST CASTLE* AND *THE BUTTERFLY AND THE VIOLIN*

“Delightful to spend time with the Thatcher sisters once again! Jillian shares her vulnerability and growth in completely relatable ways. We feel like part of the family and cheer as Jillian, Johanna, and Payton find their way back to each other.”

KATHERINE REAY, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE AUSTEN ESCAPE* AND *A PORTRAIT OF EMILY PRICE*

“In *Moments We Forget*, Beth Vogt tackles the topics of childlessness, infidelity, and faith, weaving them with sensitivity and grace into a gripping novel that’s impossible to put down. Fans of family dramas won’t want to miss this one!”

CARLA LAUREANO, RITA AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *BRUNCH AT BITTERSWEET CAFÉ*

“With deftness of pen and intuitive sensitivity to such tender issues as family tension, sibling conflict, and infertility, Beth Vogt brings yet another beautiful story of redemption in the midst of pain to her readers. An emotional, captivating continuation of the Thatcher sisters’ story, sure to satisfy readers longing for this sequel. Bravo!”

AMY SORRELLS, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *BEFORE I SAW YOU*
AND *LEAD ME HOME*

“It’s rare when a second novel in a series surpasses the first, but *Moments We Forget* is just such a book. This continuing story of the Thatcher sisters is rich in emotion as the sisters explore issues of family and faith, find healing for troubled relationships, and forge exciting new ones. I can’t wait for the next novel in the series!”

DEBORAH RANEY, AUTHOR OF THE CHANDLER SISTERS NOVELS AND
A VOW TO CHERISH

“What a delight to catch up with the Thatcher sisters in this second installment of Beth Vogt’s series. I so appreciate the authenticity of the way the Thatcher family is portrayed and I especially enjoyed getting a little more insight into oldest sister, Johanna. Handled with grace and threaded with poignancy, *Moments We Forget* weaves through the many layers of relationships to get to the heart of what it means to be a family.”

MELISSA TAGG, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF THE WALKER FAMILY
SERIES AND THE ENCHANTED CHRISTMAS COLLECTION

“Beth Vogt is a writer who sees deeply into people and relationships, and that insight translates beautifully into her novels.”

CARA PUTNAM, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *SHADOWED BY GRACE*
AND *BEYOND JUSTICE*

“*Moments We Forget* is a beautiful exploration of the often-complicated and messy relationships between sisters. Vogt skillfully weaves a tale infused with tender truth-filled moments, gentle grace, and the hope and healing found through faith.”

CATHERINE WEST, AUTHOR OF *WHERE HOPE BEGINS*

“Written with her characteristic depth, Vogt’s *Moments We Forget* explores the sometimes-unpleasant realities of the world, but still manages to leave the reader with beautiful hope. By the end, the characters were friends. I wanted to sit beside them, cry with them, and wrap my arms around them as they wrestled through questions everyone must ask at some point in life. Vogt’s books have always belonged at the top of my must-read list, and *Moments We Forget* is no exception.”

LINDSAY HARREL, AUTHOR OF *THE SECRETS OF PAPER AND INK*

“Beth Vogt writes with honest warmth, with a true understanding of her characters. What excellent weaving of stories. I never want to stop reading her novels!”

HANNAH ALEXANDER, AUTHOR OF THE HALLOWED HALLS SERIES

“With her latest book, *Moments We Forget*, author Beth K. Vogt has put me in a dilemma. The story is so compelling that I want to devour it in one sitting. Yet it’s so incredibly well written I want to savor every word. Vogt is truly a master storyteller and now every book is automatically on the top of my must-read list.”

EDIE MELSON, DIRECTOR OF THE BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAINS
CHRISTIAN WRITERS CONFERENCE

“With tenderness and skill, Beth Vogt examines the price of secrets, the weight of tragic loss, and the soul-deep poison of things left unsaid.”

LISA WINGATE, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *BEFORE WE WERE YOURS*, ON *THINGS I NEVER TOLD YOU*

“Once again Vogt’s beautiful writing captures the struggles and hopes of her broken characters, this time with a cast of sisters who find themselves forced to confront their pasts, their fears, and the healing power of forgiveness. Powerful, moving, and redemptive. Everything I hope for in a Beth Vogt novel.”

SUSAN MAY WARREN, *USA TODAY* BESTSELLING, CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR, ON *THINGS I NEVER TOLD YOU*

“Questions, regrets, and memories hang over all our lives. *Things I Never Told You* authentically explores past and present hurts in a way that will take readers deeper into the heart. Beth’s story will give real hope to anyone struggling with fractured relationships.”

CHRIS FABRY, CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *DOGWOOD* AND *THE PROMISE OF JESSE WOODS*



BETH K. VOGT

Moments
We
Forget

a
Thatcher
Sisters novel



*Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
Carol Stream, Illinois*

Visit Tyndale online at www.tyndale.com.

Visit Beth K. Vogt's website at www.bethvogt.com.

TYNDALE and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Moments We Forget

Copyright © 2019 by Beth K. Vogt. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph of woman copyright © Stephanie Hulthen. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph of background light by Alain d'Alché/Unsplash.com. All rights reserved.

Author photograph by Lisa Anne Merino, copyright © 2017. All rights reserved.

Designed by Julie Chen

Edited by Sarah Mason Rische

Published in association with the literary agency of Books & Such Literary Management, 52 Mission Circle, Suite 122, PMB 170, Santa Rosa, CA 95409.

Moments We Forget is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at csresponse@tyndale.com, or call 1-800-323-9400.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Vogt, Beth K., author.

Title: Moments we forget / Beth K. Vogt.

Description: Carol Stream, Illinois : Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., [2019] | Series: A Thatcher sisters novel

Identifiers: LCCN 2018047778 | ISBN 9781496427281 (hc) | ISBN 9781496427298 (sc)

Subjects: LCSH: Sisters—Fiction. | Domestic fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3622.O362 M66 2019 | DDC 813/.6—dc23 LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018047778>

Printed in the United States of America

25 24 23 22 21 20 19
7 6 5 4 3 2 1



I HAD HALF AN HOUR, no more than that, to get my life in order so my sisters would never suspect how unprepared I was for this morning.

I kicked the back door shut, dumping the plastic grocery bags onto the kitchen counter, easing the ache in my arms. If Johanna were hosting this morning, she'd have something homemade baking in her oven, the appealing aroma filling her immaculate kitchen.

Well, one thing was for certain—I was not Johanna.

Winston's frantic barks sounded from upstairs. Seconds later, he was scampering around my feet, his sudden appearance meaning I'd forgotten to lock him in his kennel. Again.

“Bad dog.” A halfhearted reprimand. “You’re not supposed to be down here.”

I pulled items from the plastic bags. *Please don't let me have forgotten anything during my mad dash through the grocery store.*

Cream for Johanna’s and my coffee—although she was going to have to make do with my Keurig coffeemaker, not French press.

A small box of sugar so Payton could enjoy her coffee with the preferred three heaping spoonfuls per cup.

A premade fruit salad.

Blueberry muffins.

Keurig pods.

Nothing fancy. But at least I wouldn’t look like a complete failure.

I suppose to a casual observer, Johanna, Payton, and I—the three remaining Thatcher sisters—appeared successful. And yet, while we might claim certain professional and romantic achievements, we still struggled to find our way as sisters.

At times Pepper’s words—the ones Payton had shared with Johanna and me several months ago—seemed more of a taunt than an encouragement.

“Sometimes you just have to forget all the other stuff and remember we’re sisters.”

Shouldn’t a role you acquired at birth be simple? Something you learned to do, along with walking and talking and navigating adolescence?

But then Pepper’s death at sixteen splintered our already-precarious bonds.

I selected three mugs from a kitchen cupboard. This was no time to try to unravel the complicated dynamics between me, Johanna, and Payton—not when they'd be here any minute. And not with so much riding on this morning.

It's funny how much hope people put into a cup of coffee.

Social media—Facebook and Instagram and Twitter and Pinterest and even millions of people's text messages around the world—overflow daily with memes and GIFs lauding the miracle qualities of coffee.

Coffee is the gasoline of life.

All I need is coffee and mascara.

Behind every successful person is a substantial amount of coffee.

I drink coffee for your protection.

Drink coffee and do good.

And now . . . now coffee would be the glue that bonded the three of us together.

Coffee and a book, if Payton's latest "we should do this!" idea succeeded.

Despite our determination to try to be better sisters—to overcome the damage to our relationships caused by Pepper's death . . . and secrets . . . and not knowing how to even relax with one another—it was all too easy to succumb to a lifetime of bad habits.

Of course, I knew my given position in the Thatcher sisters, volunteering to have our first Saturday morning book club meeting at my house. There were times I doubted that I'd ever get my "Is everybody happy?" theme song out of my head.

It didn't matter that I had a full-time job. That I battled unrelenting fatigue. That Geoff and I were starting renovations on our house next week. I laughed and brushed off their multiple "We can do this, Jillian," offers with light-hearted responses of "I'm good. Really. This isn't a problem at all."

And then I'd resorted to a last-minute trip to the grocery store for premade options for this morning's breakfast.

"A girl has to do what a girl has to do" was fast becoming my mantra. Only I was doing less and less and hoping to get by.

Winston scratched at the back door leading from the kitchen to the yard, distracting me from my musings on the power of caffeine mixed with a heavy dose of self-doubt.

I bent down and ruffled his white ears before opening the door. "Sorry to leave you sitting there."

He ran off along the chain-link fence, barking at a squirrel or a bird. No, wait. That was our next-door neighbor, Gianna, out with her toddler.

"Good morning. Sorry about the barking." I stepped outside, snapping my fingers. "Hush, Winston!"

"It doesn't ever bother us." Her daughter knelt, reaching through the fence. "Oh, don't do that, Avery!"

I grabbed Winston's collar, tugging him back beside me. "He won't bite, but he is a nonstop licker."

"We've talked about getting a dog, but right now my hands are full trying to keep up with a two-year-old."

"I can imagine. But she's a cute handful." I checked my watch. Almost nine o'clock. Johanna and Payton would be

here anytime now. “I’m sorry. I need to go. My sisters are coming over this morning.”

“How fun. I wish I had a sister.” Gianna took Avery’s hand, helping her stand and brushing off the knees of her jeans. “And I need to try and tire this one out so she’ll take a nap for me later.”

“Good luck with that.”

She tossed a wave over her shoulder. “See you later. Come on, Avery.”

I released Winston. “Gianna—”

“Yes?”

“I did mention Geoff and I are renovating our kitchen, right?”

My neighbor kept a firm grip on her daughter’s hand, despite Avery’s attempts to squirm loose. “I noticed the huge dumpster in your driveway—a pretty big clue—and you also said you were thinking about it earlier this summer.”

“I guess that thing is hard to miss.” Winston sniffed around my feet. “I just wanted to warn you there’ll be workmen around during the day, but most of the noise will be inside the house. A friend is acting as our project manager, and he knows all the workers.”

“Great. Thanks for letting me know.”

A knock at the front door as I entered the house signaled the arrival of one sister—most likely Johanna, who was always early.

She greeted me with a quick hug, setting her leather purse and her book on the small oak table Geoff and I kept

by the front door. At least she'd brought her copy of the book we'd chosen. The question was, had she read it?

"Good to see you, Joey. How are you?"

"Tired." Johanna slipped off her leather sandals, looking trim in black capris and a red flowing top with cutout shoulders. "Between my work and Beckett's schedule at the Air Force Academy, life's crazy."

"Still, it must be nice having him in the same state at least."

"He might as well have kept his original assignment in Alabama. The superintendent at the academy keeps him so busy dealing with speeches and briefings and I don't know what else, we barely see each other."

"But you see him more than you did when he lived in another state, right?" And not seeing each other was the norm for Beckett and Johanna.

"I'm not keeping track of hours and minutes."

"One thing I know is you and Beckett can do this. You've managed a long-distance relationship for years, which means you can manage crazy hours with both of you living in the same town. I remember how excited you both were the weekend he drove into the Springs."

"You're right, Jilly. I'm still getting used to this new phase. It was so sudden."

"Why don't you go make a cup of coffee? I apologize that it's from a plastic pod and not your preferred French press. But I do have cream . . ." Had I taken the time to put it in the fridge? Payton pulled up in front of the house as I started to close the door. "I'll wait here for Payton."

“Sounds good.” My oldest sister disappeared in a light cloud of her Coco perfume.

Payton released her long auburn hair from its ponytail as she half ran up the sidewalk. “Hey!”

“No need to run—you’re not late.”

“I lost track of time.” She shook her head, strands falling around her shoulders.

“Well, come on in.” We shared a quick hug. “Do you want coffee or water?”

“Both sound great. I’m dehydrated and undercaffeinated—a bad combination, especially if I want to get along with Johanna this morning.”

“Don’t start.” I resisted the urge to shake my finger at Payton.

“It was a joke.”

In the kitchen, Johanna had arranged the fresh-from-a-plastic-container muffins onto a plate. The premade fruit salad now sat on the counter in a white ceramic bowl.

“Thanks.” I retrieved a serving spoon from the drawer. “I could have done that.”

“I figured I would make myself useful while I waited for my coffee.” She gave Payton a slow once-over. “Did you just come from the gym?”

“Technically, yes, but I was coaching, not working out. I met one of my JV girls for a private lesson. She wanted to work on blocking.” She raised both hands, waving aside her explanation. “Sorry if you’re offended, big sister. I couldn’t shower if I wanted to be here close to on time.”

Johanna hadn’t commented on my casual attire of relaxed

jeans and a navy-blue Broncos T-shirt—a well-loved gift from Dad. But Johanna and Payton would find something to bicker about even if they'd taken a vow of silence. And me? I would always be the designated driver of the emotional vehicle that carried our merry little trio.

“You look fine, Payton. This is a book club, not a formal affair. Grab yourself some coffee and I'll get your water.” I retrieved a glass from the closest cupboard. “I thought I could walk you both through the kitchen—tell you about our renovation plans—before we sit down and talk about the book. Zach was here last night, finalizing everything.”

There was no overlooking how Payton's eyes lit up at the mention of Zach. Maybe someday soon she'd share more about their relationship. For now, she maintained a “just friends” demeanor and kept all details to herself. Of course, even friendship with the man she once blamed for Pepper's death would be considered progress by a lot of people.

“I still don't understand why our family—and Payton in particular—is so chummy with Zach Gaines.”

Payton stiffened at Johanna's comment.

“Zach helped us select these beautiful white cabinets—” I spoke up, hoping if I kept talking, I could divert the brewing tension—“that he'll custom design and install for us. A few will have inset glass. They'll work so well with the countertops we picked out. The counters are made from pressed paper, if you can believe that.”

“Pressed paper?” Johanna's brow furrowed as if I'd suggested we were using blue-lined notebook paper for our kitchen counters.

“It’s a new green alternative. We selected a pewter color. Between enlarging the window over the sink and knocking out the wall between the kitchen and the dining room, everything is going to feel so open and light.”

Payton finished chugging her glass of water, ignoring Johanna’s glare. “Zach told me that he also agreed to be the project manager.”

“Geoff asked him about that when we first started discussing renovating the kitchen. What with Geoff taking on some extra projects at work and me being gone at the bank, we figured we needed someone to oversee the renovation. Zach talked with his boss, who agreed to a four-day workweek for him in the office and one day from home.” My explanation was more for Johanna’s benefit than Payton’s, who I’m certain already knew this. “Geoff and I have so much more peace of mind, knowing Zach is going to make certain everything stays on track.”

“What else are you planning?”

Before I spoke, I prepped Payton’s coffee, silently counting off three sugars. “We picked out dark wood floors last weekend. And I finally decided to splurge on a waterfall counter for the island. I also asked Zach to check on replacing the back door with French doors.”

“Those will be expensive.” Johanna found plates and silverware, obviously ready to eat.

“Yes, but my bonus was bigger than we expected, and Geoff had been saving for this before we got married. Besides, we want to do the kitchen right and not have any regrets later.”

Johanna offered both of us plates. “You’ve been watching too many home makeover shows.”

My big sister was not going to talk me out of my fun—or convince me to be more economical. Geoff and I knew what we were doing. And it wasn’t as if we’d spent a lot of money on a lavish wedding.

“We’re considering this renovation a belated wedding gift to ourselves.” I added cubes of cantaloupe, honeydew, and watermelon to my plate. “We’re both ready to have this curling laminate pulled up. The old, worn cabinets torn out.”

Geoff and I were looking ahead—not back over our shoulders at everything that had overtaken us during the past year after my breast cancer diagnosis and treatment.

“Why don’t we each get something to eat, refresh our coffee if we need to, and go sit in the living room so we can talk about the book?” Winston scratched at the back door again. “I’ll let Winston inside and put him in his kennel.”

Payton selected a muffin, pausing to take the plate that Johanna held out to her. “Oh, don’t do that. He won’t be a bother.”

“Right.” I couldn’t help but laugh. “We all have food. You know he’ll wander around begging.”

“We won’t feed him, will we, Johanna?”

Johanna sniffed. “I’m not the one who sneaks food to that dog.”

“I’ll behave.”

“You’re as bad as Dad when it comes to Winston.”

In a few moments, we were all settled—Johanna and I on

the couch and Payton in Geoff's favorite oversize chair, with Winston sitting at attention at her feet.

Payton made a display of ignoring Winston's whines. "So what did you all think of the first chapter?"

"I don't like the idea of having to read a biography. I feel like I'm back in college."

Payton groaned. "Johanna, you said that about the classics Jillian suggested—and this was the one book we all agreed on. Besides, I'm the one back in college."

"I just think we should have looked at more options."

"We made the decision to read this book." Payton held up her copy. "We all bought it. It's done."

Before I could decide if I was going to jump in and referee this early, my phone pinged with a text message.

"This might be Geoff checking with me while he's finishing up at the gym. He probably wants to see if we need anything at the store." I angled the phone where it sat on the coffee table, ready to silence it. But instead of Geoff's familiar face, Mom's name appeared.

How are you feeling today? You've looked so tired lately that I was worried, but then Johanna explained that it's a common side effect of the medication you're on.

What?

I gripped my phone, rereading the message, ignoring the fact that Johanna and Payton were both watching me. "Johanna, you're talking to Mom about my medication?"

"What do you mean?" Johanna sipped her coffee, eyeing me over the rim of her cup.

Before I could answer, there was another ping.

And I can understand if you're also upset that you can't get pregnant while you're on Tamoxifen.

No. I pressed my lips together, struggling to think of what to say—how to respond to Mom's text. To what Johanna had done.

If the first text was bothersome, the second one was as if Johanna had invited herself and all of the family—Payton, our parents—to my various doctors' appointments. She might as well have included Beckett and Zach Gaines in the group, too.

"You told Mom that I can't get pregnant?"

Johanna's facial expression didn't change as she took another sip of her not-French-press coffee before replying. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about these two texts from Mom." I held up my phone. "She says you explained how my medication is making me tired. And told her that I can't get pregnant while I'm on Tamoxifen."

"Oh, that. We were talking . . . I can't remember when. And she said she was worried about you." Johanna nibbled on a cube of watermelon. "I took the time to explain things to her so she would understand what was going on."

"Why would you do that?"

"Because she was worried about you." Johanna spoke slowly, as if I needed her to enunciate so I would be able to understand. "I just told her things everybody knows. Fatigue is a common side effect of that medication—"

"Everybody knows?" My voice was getting louder, but I didn't seem to have any control over it. "Does everybody

know I can't get pregnant? Did you post it on a billboard along I-25?"

"Now you're being ridiculous, Jill." My sister dismissed my questions with a shake of her head. "People know you can't get pregnant while you're on Tamoxifen."

"You know, Johanna." Payton spoke up. "*You* know."

"Of course I know. I'm a pharmacist."

"That's exactly my point." Payton was in full-on offensive mode now. "You had no right to talk to Mom. Will you just admit you invaded Jillian's privacy?"

It was as if I could see my words, Johanna's words, and now Payton's words swirling around me like a verbal tornado, the strength of it already threatening to pull me apart. Johanna leaned back. Payton leaned forward. Both of them ignorant of the increasing danger.

"I shouldn't have said anything." I tossed the statement like a white flag. "Can we just talk about the book?"

Payton twisted to look at me. "Are you kidding me? Of course you had to say something. Johanna never should have talked to Mom without asking you if it was okay first."

"You're both overreacting." With a wave of her hand, Johanna dismissed both Payton and me. "Mom asked a few questions. I answered them."

"You, of all people, know about HIPAA and patient privacy, Johanna."

Johanna gritted her teeth. "We're family, Payton."

"Family takes care of each other. Family respects each other. You never have our backs."

"It's nice to know how you really feel."

“It is how I feel. It’s how Jillian feels, too.”

And now I was being dragged into Johanna and Payton’s fight.

“Don’t speak for me, Payton.”

Payton’s eyes widened. Then she crossed her arms. “Fine. Speak for yourself.”

“I would, if I thought anyone was listening.”

At last I had my sisters’ attention.

Being with Johanna and Payton was like competing with athletes when you knew they played dirty—and wanted to win at any cost.

Silence.

No one was saying anything. And none of us had been listening to each other, either.

“Did you have something to say, Jillian?” Payton’s voice was quieter, but there was an edge to it, an unspoken challenge.

No matter what I said, one of my sisters would not be satisfied.

Better to focus on the original reason we were together.

“What I wanted to do today was have coffee and talk about a book.” I glanced at my phone again. Set it aside. Maybe I could let Johanna know how I felt about all this . . . just say it and be done with it. “Not find out Johanna had talked to Mom about my private life.”

“I don’t understand why you’re making such a big deal about this, Jillian. You would have told Mom eventually.”

“Maybe. Okay, yes, I probably would have talked to Mom—but that’s the whole point.” I focused on Johanna,

hoping she would understand. “*I would have told her. Not you. Me.*”

How did Payton and Johanna spend so much of their lives arguing with one another? Listening to them disagreeing, pushing and pulling for the chance to occupy the right position, always exhausted me. The rare occasion I stood up to Johanna wore me out within minutes. And now, with everything else going on, I might as well be trying to stand up for myself while running on an out-of-control treadmill.

“I don’t understand why you can’t see I was only trying to help. Mom was worried and I gave her the information she needed so she would be calmer.”

“It wasn’t your place—” Payton stepped back into the conversation.

Johanna immediately turned on her. “I was talking to Jill—”

Confronting Johanna had been a bad idea. I was the peacemaker, not the one who challenged her. That was Payton’s role.

“To get through this first book club meeting, are we going to need to pretend we’re back in elementary school and read our books in silence?”

My attempt at humor failed. Whatever fragile truce we’d declared the past few months seemed to rip apart.

“I think—” Johanna stood—“I’ll just call it for today.”

I scrambled to my feet, causing Winston to jump up from where he was resting in front of the fireplace. “Johanna, don’t leave.”

“Obviously my attempts to help Mom are being

misinterpreted. And I didn't come here to be attacked or to join a . . . a reading circle."

And with that, Johanna collected her book and her purse and stalked toward the front door. Winston scampered around her feet, impeding her getaway.

I covered my face with my hands, the slam of the door echoing in my head. "I shouldn't have said anything."

"Don't be silly." Payton sounded as if she wanted to laugh. "Of course you should have."

"But now Johanna's upset . . ."

"She wants you to think she's upset. She's made a scene and walked out, and she hopes you'll call her later and apologize. That way she doesn't have to say she's sorry."

"What?" I peered at Payton over my hands.

"Think about it. Has it ever occurred to you that Johanna likes to be upset? That she uses it to keep us in our place?" Payton offered me a smile. "Whatever you do, don't call and apologize. You didn't do anything wrong."

"But I—"

"You didn't do anything wrong." Payton slipped Winston a bite of blueberry muffin. "And I bet you that Johanna will still be here tomorrow with everyone else to prep for the renovation."



Colorado Springs knew how to do Septembers.

The trees in our neighborhood were hinting at autumn with leaves changing to brilliant yellows and oranges and reds, even as the temperatures remained warm, but not in

the “why is it still so hot?” range. September was like an anticipated visit with a pleasant friend who stopped by once a year and never overstayed their welcome.

I looped my arm through Geoff’s, my head just brushing his shoulder. His verbal command released Winston from a heel to walk in front of us.

“He’s doing well at obeying you when we’re out on a walk.”

“Better. He’s doing better.” His eyes shielded by both his glasses and the brim of the baseball cap that tamed his unruly brown hair, Geoff tugged on the leash to remind Winston that he wasn’t his own boss. “If he wasn’t on this leash, he’d take off running for no reason at all.”

“It’s such a nice afternoon. Although I do look forward to seeing snow on the Peak again.”

“Well, it’s shown up in August before, so it’s not impossible to happen anytime now.” Geoff adjusted his long-legged stride to my slower pace. He probably wasn’t even aware he’d developed the habit during the past months. “I just realized you never told me how the book club went this morning.”

“We may have had our first and last Saturday book club . . .”

“Oh, come on. What could go so wrong?”

“Well, Johanna walked out in a huff.”

Geoff chuckled. “What did she and Payton argue about this time?”

“They didn’t argue . . . well, they did. But it started off with me and Johanna arguing. . . .”

“You . . . argued with Johanna.” Now Geoff had the nerve

to laugh—his familiar full-on head-thrown-back burst of laughter that caused Winston to glance back at him. “I’m supposed to believe that?”

I pulled away from Geoff. “I know, right? What would you say if I told you I snapped at Payton, too?”

“I would most definitely not believe that.”

“It was a mess.”

“I can see why you said it may be your first and last Saturday book club. The three of you couldn’t even discuss a book together?”

“It had nothing to do with the book.”

“What was the problem then?”

“I found out Johanna talked to Mom—without my permission—about my medication and the side effects. About the fact I can’t get pregnant until I’m off the Tamoxifen.”

“Okay.”

Geoff might as well have said, “*Is that all?*”

“Why aren’t you upset about that?”

He shifted the brim of his baseball cap. “I didn’t realize you expected me to get upset—”

“Geoff, that’s personal information!”

“Johanna told your mom, not a stranger.”

“Why are you taking her side?”

“Whoa.” Geoff stopped on the sidewalk, turning to face me and bringing Winston to an abrupt halt. “No taking sides here—and if I was, I would be on your side. Just processing things out loud, which I will stop doing immediately because it’s not helping either of us.”

I leaned closer to him, resting my head against his chest.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize how much it still bothered me. It didn’t help that I was tired and nervous about not having done enough to make things nice for the book club.”

“I’m sure Johanna and Payton were happy with what you had—”

“I told them about the kitchen renovation, and Johanna questioned all our choices. How much money we’re spending. And then we’d barely started talking about the book—and Jo was complaining *again*—and Mom texted, which is how I found out she knew about my not being able to get pregnant.”

Geoff slipped his arm around my waist, easing me forward, and started walking again.

“Maybe we should have said something up front to everyone, back when we decided to freeze my eggs. But it’s a little late to rethink our decision to keep that private, right?”

Geoff didn’t respond—keeping quiet like he often did when we talked about my cancer and especially when we talked about the reality that I might struggle getting pregnant. Always so careful not to upset me.

A few more moments of silence and then, “We’ll figure it out together—like we always do.”

“Was I wrong?”

“Wrong?”

“To get upset about Johanna telling Mom?”

Geoff stopped again. His eyes warmed as he leaned closer, his kiss gentle. “You know I will always be on your side, Jill.”

I closed my eyes, allowing the moment to lengthen.

Forgetting we were on a walk, until Geoff jerked away as Winston pulled on the leash.

“Sorry.” He gave me a slow wink.

“It’s okay.” I faced forward as Geoff allowed Winston to tug him along. “So tell me, what’s going on with you?”

“Work got interesting yesterday.”

“When is cybersecurity not interesting?”

“True. But yesterday my boss asked me to consider speaking at a conference on ethics in cybersecurity.”

“Ethics?”

“Yes.” Geoff ducked under a low-hanging tree branch, filled with leaves turning a bright orange. “There are different ways to approach the issue, so I need to figure out if I want to do it and, if so, what they’re looking for.”

“*They* being?”

“My bosses. The conference is in Denver early next spring.”

“This sounds like a great opportunity.”

“It’d be different. I’m used to doing my work, coming home—maybe *attending* a conference. I’ve never even thought about speaking at one.”

“You’d be great at it.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“How soon do you have to let them know?”

“They mentioned it yesterday. I said we’d talk again next week.”

“I know you need to think about it some more, but my vote is yes.”

He paused long enough to press a quick kiss on the top of my head. “And thanks for that.”

This was a chance to support my husband, an opportunity to turn the spotlight off me, my cancer, and put it onto Geoff. Onto something positive. This speaking opportunity was an indicator that things were better. Not perfect, but better.

We were passing Gianna's house—almost home. “I reminded Gianna about the kitchen renovation when we were talking earlier today.”

“Why?”

“Because workers will be around. Cars and trucks parked in front of our house—possibly in front of her house. I just thought it was the neighborly thing to do.”

“Right. I hadn't thought about how the renovation might affect the neighbors—I mean, beyond the fact that they have to look at that dumpster.”

“Avery, her little girl, loves Winston, but Gianna says she has her hands full with a two-year-old.”

“I can only imagine.”

“What would you want?”

“What?”

“Would you want to start our family with a son or daughter?”

Geoff adjusted his glasses. “I hadn't really thought about it.”

“No preference for a boy or girl?”

“No . . . no preference.” Geoff stopped by the gate leading into the backyard and handed me Winston's leash. “Here, take him on inside. I'll go get the mail.”

“We can get the mail . . .”

He jogged away with a quick wave. “I'll be waiting at the front door.”

“Okay. Fine.”

That was a bit abrupt. But it gave me the chance to appreciate my husband as he jogged around to the front of the house . . . a moment to daydream about the day we’d go for a walk with our son or daughter. Of course, I’d learned not to think too far ahead, but it was good to allow myself to dream again, if only for a few moments.



The Thatcher sisters were together two days in a row—a rare event now that we were all adults. And a risky one, given the interpersonal fiasco during our first-ever book club meeting.

Also risky considering how I had listened to Payton’s recommendation and hadn’t called and apologized to Johanna.

Hadn’t made things all better.

Of course, when Geoff and I talked more Saturday night, he’d agreed with Payton, telling me not to call Johanna—and not to worry so much. So it was two against one opposing me about contacting my older sister. Instead, to resist temptation, Geoff and I had watched a movie, and then I’d gone to bed early and slept late.

It wasn’t all an escape—sleep was survival nowadays.

Now my house seemed to overflow with people moving between the main floor, the upstairs, and the basement. The cupboards in the soon-to-be-renovated kitchen stood open, half-empty. Mom faced the fridge, either setting the contents onto what little counter space we had, adding them to a pot of soup simmering on the stove, or throwing them into a big black trash bag. Payton and Zach, who’d come later

than everyone else because they'd probably attended church, wrapped and stacked plates and bowls in a large blue plastic bin. They didn't mention where they'd been and no one asked because Thatchers didn't "do" God—but Payton seemed to be curious, thanks to Zach's faith. Johanna staked out her own corner and analyzed my spice rack, tossing outdated square tins and glass bottles into the trash.

"Where's Winston? Who let him out of his kennel? Winston?" I stood at the bottom of the stairs that led up to our bedrooms. "Did someone put him in the backyard?"

"Yes. Dad has him outside." Mom leaned around the fridge door. "If you're not careful, he's going to steal that dog one day."

With my mischievous dog found, all I had to remember was what I'd been doing before I realized Winston wasn't in his kennel.

"Did you find those other plastic containers?" Payton closed an empty cupboard door.

"Right! I left them upstairs."

"I'll get them." Geoff gave me a quick kiss in passing. Zach offered to carry down more storage bins and followed behind him.

"I thought I'd done more to get ready for demo day." I pressed both hands to my face. "But what with Geoff and I both working . . ."

"We'll get it done." Payton came and stood next to me, offering me a side hug. "This is a great time to clean house, no pun intended. Mom will wipe down the fridge for whoever is picking it up later. Zach promised to make a run

to the thrift store with the giveaway box. Johanna's going crazy checking dates on all your spices and canned goods, so you'll be all set when you're restocking your brand-new kitchen."

We all observed the invisible boundary lines, first set up by Johanna dragging the trash can over to the counter and turning her back on everyone. Enough distance so there was no discernible friction—and no real conversation, either.

But working together was better than arguing.

"Jill, the fridge is empty and the veggie soup is simmering. Your dad wants to take Winston for a walk." As I moved away from the stairs, Mom nodded to where Dad now waited by the front door, Winston prancing around his feet on the end of his leash. "Is it okay if I go with them?"

"Go. Relax. Tackling the fridge was a huge job."

"When we get back, we'll run to the store and get bread to have with the soup."

"You don't have to do that."

"Soup is always better with bread. I'll grab something for dessert, too."

And it would make Mom happy to feed everyone today and to know Geoff and I would have leftovers tomorrow.

Geoff stopped beside me. "All the storage containers go in the basement until after the renovation, right?"

"Yes. We just need to make sure they're labeled."

Johanna spoke up from her corner of the kitchen, still facing the spice rack. "Dishes, glassware, and utensils are labeled with blue duct tape. Food items are labeled with yellow duct tape. Pots and pans—silver. Other cookware items—white."

“Okay.” I guessed that rapid-fire announcement counted as talking to me. Sort of.

“You mentioned you were using a small fridge during the reno, so I made up a box of items for you and Geoff.” She still hadn’t looked at me. “Keurig, paper plates, bowls, cups, napkins, plasticware.”

I tried to keep up with all she’d said. Colors. The items she’d put in the box. Where had she said she’d put it?

“Did you tell Geoff?”

“No.” Johanna tossed a quick glance over her shoulder. “Do you want me to?”

“No. It’s fine. I just wondered.”

I would act like I was following along. It was what I did more and more these days—struggle to follow along. Pretend.

Johanna tilted her head, watching me as if she detected my confusion. I needed to choose to ignore one or the other—the confusion all around me or the confusion swirling inside me. And I needed to remember it was okay to forget things every once in a while. Everybody did that.

“Where’s the number of the guy who’s coming to pick up the fridge?”

Geoff. Back with another question.

“Didn’t I give it to you when we were talking last night?”

“No. You said you’d give it to me today. I want to call him and confirm when he’s coming over.”

“Oh. Right.” I scrambled to separate today from the details of yesterday and something that happened several weeks ago. “We posted the fridge on craigslist, right?”

Geoff had grabbed a bottle of water off the counter and

gulped half of it down while waiting for me to answer. “We were going to. But then you said that one of Harper’s neighbors bought it to use in his garage.”

“Right. Right.”

Now if only Geoff would keep feeding me clues—bits of information that would help me remember where I’d left that phone number.

“I think his name was . . . Rick . . . or maybe Ron.”

“Do you want to call Harper and ask her?”

That would be easier. But I had written the information down. It wasn’t like I could call my best friend every time I forgot something. “Let me find the number. I know I have it.”

Ten minutes later, after searching the messages on my Facebook page, my texts, and my voice mails, as well as a pile of papers on my bedroom dresser, I found the information Geoff needed. It was like playing a virtual game of Memory with my brain, flipping over different things to find the matching details and put together the question and answer I needed. *No . . . no . . . no . . . yes!* And behind me, I left a pile of papers strewn across our bed, which I’d have to deal with later.

What would be the next question that would cause me more mental muddle?

Dinner was a welcome respite from a day of nonstop activity. And we didn’t use any of the paper products Johanna had brought, thanks to Mom picking some up at the store, along with the bread, butter, a half gallon of ice cream, and a tiny container of vegan Häagen-Dazs for Payton.

A lull in the conversation as we all sat around the dining room table seemed like the appropriate time to thank everyone for their help.

“I hope you all know how much Geoff and I appreciate everything you’ve done to help us get ready for tomorrow.” I was careful to scan the table, making eye contact with no one specific for longer than half a second, if that.

“Beckett’s sorry he got called into work.” Johanna still didn’t quite look at me when she spoke, but at least it seemed that comment wasn’t meant for the group at large.

“We understand work trumps packing up our kitchen.”

Johanna offered me a glimpse of a smile. “Thanks.”

“I’ll check with the guys one last time.” Zach spoke to Geoff. “Make sure they’ll be here bright and early.”

“I hope not too early. I know you’re not sleeping well, Jillian. . . .” Mom’s voice trailed off as she traded a look with my older sister. “I mean, Johanna mentioned . . .”

And now glances were exchanged between Mom and Johanna. Payton and me. Mom and me. An awkward game of visual avoidance.

Somebody had to say something.

Fine.

“I know you and Johanna have talked about my . . . my health, Mom. But I . . . I would prefer you didn’t.”

Now not only was I taking Payton’s advice and not apologizing to Johanna, but I was correcting her and Mom. At the same time. In front of everyone.

What little soup I’d eaten threatened to rise back up my throat. I tried to swallow, massaging my collarbone.

“I wasn’t trying to talk about you behind your back.” Mom’s voice wavered.

“I understand that.” Johanna’s heated stare seemed to scorch my face. “But Johanna shouldn’t have discussed the side effects of my medication and . . . and the fact that I can’t get pregnant while I’m on Tamoxifen without talking to me about it first.”

I could almost hear Payton cheering me on from the sidelines, adding an invisible cartwheel just for fun.

“But why didn’t you tell me?”

Mom’s question, weighted down with the unspoken words “*after all, I’m your mother,*” silenced me for a moment . . . and then backed me into a corner.

“I’m sorry, Mom.” The words whooshed out of me like helium from a deflating balloon. “Maybe I should have talked to you sooner. . . . If I had, I could have avoided all this.”

And with that simple apology, all was as it should be in the Thatcher family again. I’d assumed my expected place, which so often included an apology of some sort. And Johanna and Payton were once again at odds—with me in the middle.

“Oh, Jill, I understand.” Mom’s smile encompassed my mistake with instantaneous forgiveness. “You were trying to do what you thought was best.”

And I’d made a mistake.

Now that I’d admitted it, everything was better—the world was right when I was wrong.

It looked as if Payton was going to say something, but Zach gave a quick, almost-imperceptible shake of his head. She pursed her lips and exhaled . . . and said nothing.

I waited for Johanna to step in. Maybe follow my lead with her own apology.

“I’m sorry this was even a topic of discussion again.” She stood, gathering her bowl and napkin. “I explained yesterday that all I was doing was answering Mom’s questions—not attempting to invade anyone’s privacy.”

Not quite the apology I’d hoped for.

“Johanna, don’t try to make it sound like what you did was right.” Payton jumped past Zach’s restraint.

“We’re family. And like it or not, we are all affected by the fact that you had breast cancer, Jillian. I, for one, would rather talk about things. Not hide things.”

Oh, there were so many things our family didn’t talk about.

How Pepper’s death had affected Payton. How it had affected all of us. How Johanna had read Payton’s journal and that led to the decision to send Payton away for medical help when she was sixteen . . . We chose silence over words again and again.

My sister’s words slammed against me, scattering what was left of any defense I’d tried to muster. I wasn’t hiding when I decided not to discuss every little medical detail with my family . . . I was trying to deal with my life. One day, one reality, at a time.

If anything, I should have started and finished with the apology. I knew the routine and shouldn’t have deviated from it. What good had it done?

My family was horrible at respecting boundaries. And apparently the temporary cease-fire between the Thatcher sisters was at an end.