

## Prologue

The September breeze swirled with balmy temperatures, yet whispered the approach of fall in Flagstaff, Arizona. Stephen took the hand of his wife, Annika, as they followed their favorite walking circuit along the pine shaded sidewalk on the edge of town. The streets were quiet that Sunday afternoon, save the occasional jogger or dog-walker.

“What a perfect day.” Stephen drew a full breath into his lungs. “Especially after such a busy and rainy summer.”

“*Really* busy,” agreed Annika, knowing they weren’t just talking about the unusually warm season that had just bade them farewell. It was their second month of an empty nest. The preparations, shopping, and packing right beforehand had occupied her mind for a while, staving off the emptiness to come. But once they took Derek to campus, waved goodbye, and drove away without him in the car, reality shook her to the core.

It had been easier when Bryan had left in July to start a campus job. He’d already been gone from the house for two years, so Annika considered herself broken in for his departures. But Derek’s absence left the house too quiet.

“I think it’s already easier now without both boys.” She voiced thoughts that were never far from her mind, as if to convince herself. “I’m bouncing back.” She was trying, in any case.

“Yes, you are.” Stephen smiled and squeezed her hand. “And it’ll keep getting easier.” He cocked his head and met her gaze. “I sort of like having you to myself.”

She grinned back at him. “I’m sure I’ll enjoy the rhythm too. No more early mornings. And less laundry. And quiet while we’re reading and having coffee after breakfast.”

“We’ll have to plan a trip soon. It’ll be different with just us. I’m looking forward to it.”

“That sounds nice.” Annika let out a sudden chuckle. “Call me crazy, but I just thought about the mess I left in the kitchen. I *never* do that. Maybe I’m already adjusting to the freewheeling empty nest lifestyle.” After church, they’d had a hurried lunch of leftovers and rushed outside, impatient to enjoy the afternoon, calm and clear after a series of thunderstorms the previous week.

“They’ll wait. Now, how about we talk about the trip we want to take next spring? Any ideas? Maybe Europe, or even a cruise.”

“Hmm. You can give me some options, since you’ve been thinking about it already. We can talk about it later tonight.”

They fell silent as they kept a steady pace. Once both boys were away at college, they began the habit of walking together daily. It helped soften the transition between a full house of noisy teenagers with assorted friends and...just the two of them.

The full foliage of cottonwoods blended with the darker shades of evergreens, so numerous at that elevation. Soon it would transform to an orange and red painting, splashing the pine-dotted mountains and fields with color.

On the return toward the house, they approached a stone bridge which had been there forever. The rain had filled the stream beneath to a higher level and the gurgle of tumbling water added natural music to the peaceful day.

Something beneath the bridge caught Annika's eye. "Stephen, what's that under the bridge?" "Huh? I didn't see anything." His graying brows furrowed.

Annika slowed her steps. Maybe her eyes had played a trick on her. "I thought I saw someone down there who might be hurt."

"Sometimes homeless guys hang around down there. We should keep our distance." Caution laced his voice.

Annika had already crossed the bridge and was scooting around the embankment. Stephen jogged to catch up with her.

"I know what you're saying, Stephen, but my gut is telling me this is different." When she felt that nudge, she needed to follow it. Maybe God was telling her something.

"Okay, but let's go slowly. Could be an ambush."

Stephen and Annika edged toward the shadow under the bridge, taking in the scene. A lone man lay on his back, unconscious. Near the curve of the bridge's underside sat a knapsack, a rolled-up sleeping bag, and a couple of empty food cans.

The man groaned and his head turned to one side and the other, as though thrashing in pain. His eyes remained closed. Through his dark beard, Annika saw him gasping for breath. "He's not sleeping, Stephen. I think...I think he's sick."

"Keep an eye out and I'll see if he's awake." Stephen crept closer to the man. "Sir, are you okay? Are you alright?"

The man didn't respond, though another groan spiraled from his throat. Stephen reached out to touch his forehead. His grim gaze found Annika's. "He's burning up. He's sick, just like you said."

"Can we...can we take him home?" Annika crossed her arms, a rumble of concern filling her chest and weighing inside. The man looked to be in his late twenties. Her stomach squeezed. This was someone's *son*. Someone who likely didn't know where he was.

"Or to the hospital." Stephen felt for a pulse. "His heart rate seems fast. The hospital is safer for him, since we don't know what's going on. He may have pneumonia, especially if he's been sleeping here outdoors."

Annika swallowed the lump in her throat. "Okay. Let's take him to the Medical Center. We can check on him tomorrow. Maybe they'll find ID on him and can notify his family, if he has one."

"First thing is to get him safe. I can stay here with him. Can you bring the car?"

"Yes, good idea." Annika rose. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

They exchanged a worried gaze. "I hope it's not too late."

Stephen's ominous tone caused a chill. Dread for this youthful stranger gripped Annika's chest. "Me too."

She took off jogging toward the house, praying all the way home.

## Chapter One

Rick Russo pushed the lukewarm mug of coffee away from him as he sat at his mom's kitchen table. He opened the Brenner Falls Times to the Help Wanted section and folded back the front page, creasing it carefully with two fingers. Funny, they still had help-wanted ads in a physical newspaper. Suited him, since he didn't have a computer. As he shifted his chair closer to the tabletop, he grunted. Though he was only thirty-one, the print seemed too small to read.

"You're up early." The voice of his mother, Debbie Russo, reached his ears before he saw her. He wasn't used to her voice anymore, not after nearly fourteen years away. Nor was he used to living in her house, but he'd only arrived in early May. Less than a week ago. He'd give himself time to adjust. He hoped he could.

"Hey, Mom." He turned his head and smiled at her. She laid a hand on his shoulder. She'd been doing that a lot since he'd come home. Though he liked the physical connection, it stirred guilt inside. He'd been gone so long, he had the impression she wanted to hold on to him to assure herself he was truly there and not some kind of mirage.

It was Friday, but she'd taken the morning off for a dental appointment, so she still wore her bathrobe. She went to the counter and poured a cup of coffee then sat across the table from him. "Are you finding anything interesting?"

Rick shrugged. "*Interesting* isn't really my criteria at this point. I need a job and about anything will do." He scanned the column again. "But I may draw the line at garbage collector. I know it's honest work, but imagine the smell."

His mom chuckled. "I'd have to agree. Anything else?"

He held up a finger and scoped the bold print. "Yeah. Door to door surveys."

"No." They both said at the same time, then laughed.

"Here's one. A restaurant called The Grateful Fork needs a dishwasher and busboy. Pay seems pretty good."

His mother took a sip of her coffee. "That's a good option. It's a popular place in town. Kind of a gathering spot for locals. And you've got to start somewhere." She took another sip. "You have restaurant experience, right?"

"Loads. Too much to count." It was true. He'd bussed tables, he'd waited tables, he'd cooked, he'd washed dishes. For over a decade living mostly on the streets of Arizona he'd held many short-term restaurant jobs. They were easy to get and easy to leave, whenever the money ran short, which was all the time. Get and leave the jobs, over and over for more than a decade. He let out a deep sigh. A *wasted* decade.

"That sounds like it has potential. Not forever, just to get you on your feet."

Rick met his mother's gaze. "Yeah. Need to do that. Thanks for letting me crash here, Mom."

She touched his hand. "You're not crashing, Rick. This is your home, don't forget. Just because you haven't lived here in a while, you still have a room, and you always will. Please stay as long as you want." She swallowed. When her eyes filled, she looked away. "I'm sorry. I...I've missed you so much. And I worried about you all those years."

She returned her gaze to him and forced a smile, swiping a rogue tear from her cheek. “I know I’m pressuring you. I don’t mean to. I’m just thrilled to have you back, so please don’t hurry off yet.” Wordless pleading poured from her eyes.

Rick’s chest clutched. He covered her hand with his other one. To lighten the moment, he made a gruff sound in his throat. “No way. Not hurrying anywhere, Mom. I was gone too long and I’m...I’m sorry about that.”

She pushed her chair back and withdrew her hands from his. “Well, you’re home now.” She forced a cheery smile then added, “I’m not trying to mother you. I respect the fact that you’re an adult.”

“Of course.” Rick grew uneasy with the exchange but pushed the feeling down.

“So, how about some breakfast?” Her voice became brisk. She rose and went to the fridge.

“You don’t have to cook breakfast every day either, Mom. How about I cook for you?”

“Okay. It’ll give you that much more experience to get the restaurant job.” They laughed.

While he stirred up scrambled eggs and laid out the bacon on the griddle, his mind flitted around. It still felt weird being home again, after no more than a handful of visits, financed by his brother, Ben, over the last fourteen years.

Mom had renovated some of the rooms, freshened them up, so the house didn’t look exactly like the one he’d grown up in. Again, courtesy Ben, renovator extraordinaire. The first example of that was the kitchen. Soft yellow painted walls glowed in friendly welcome, along with updated artwork, a new counter and cupboards, and new fixtures. At the windows over the sink and by the table hung matching curtains. Mom had replaced most of the rugs throughout the house and had the bathroom redone.

But aside from cosmetic changes, the real reason it felt foreign to him was that so *many* years had passed since he’d lived there. Even his memories of childhood fought through filmy webs of time to regain conscious access.

Rick often had to remind himself of the moment he’d had a conviction that he should return home to Brenner Falls. He’d just finished dinner with Stephen and Annika, helped with dishes, and returned upstairs. The minute he entered the bedroom he’d occupied for nearly two years, he *knew*. Otherwise, he’d never have returned home. He would have eventually found his own place and a different job in Flagstaff, which he’d grown to like, and had felt like home.

Not that he didn’t like Brenner Falls. He had good memories up to a point. That point was about the age of seven. Then everything went down the toilet. His mom had started drinking. Before long, she was a full-blown alcoholic. Several years later, when Rick was fifteen, his dad died of lung cancer. He and Ben had raised themselves, more or less. And the stuff they’d gotten into back then... He grimaced. Such stupid stuff...

With time, he and Ben took completely different paths. Ben got into church and eventually convinced their mom to go. Ben went on to college, and now was a respected engineer for the city of Brenner Falls. He was also newly married. Meanwhile, Rick left home to seek adventure out west.

He snorted with regret. Some adventure *that* was. He thought living with his adopted family, his band of fellow druggies, would fill in the gaps of what he’d left behind. All he’d lost. For a while, it seemed to.

That was then. If he'd had any idea back then how God would get ahold of him, he'd have doubled over laughing in disbelief. Or shock. Despite his momentary regret and despair, a smile pulled his lips. God must be crazy to run after a foul-up like him.

"Eggs are ready, Mom," he called toward the table, giving the fluffy yellow pile a final flip with the spatula.

"Already?" She grinned and put her hands on her hips. "You're quick. *Quick Rick*, they're going to call you over at The Fork."

"Yeah, that's it." He smiled and held out his palms. "But what can I say? I'm a pro."



Kelsey Brewster logged out of her computer and gazed through the kitchen window at the dainty green maple blossoms making their spring appearance. Her office consisted of a corner kitchen nook at her parents' house. From her chair, she could simply shift her focus to the outdoors and escape her screen for a few moments. She'd worked all morning at her online job, but it was time to stop. She'd get back to it later that evening.

She stood, stretched, and crossed the entry hall to the den, a long, comfortable room with an expanse of windows on the back overlooking several acres under pine trees. "Molly, are you ready to go?" Her sister sat cross-legged on the floor, coloring at the square coffee table surrounded by a sectional sofa. "We have to leave in a few minutes."

"I did a picture for you." Molly's grin stretched out, making her round face look wider and happier. "You have to come here if you want to see it."

"You're stalling, Molly." Kelsey smiled in spite of herself as her chest swelled with affection for her sister, who was two years older, but much younger in mental capacity.

Kelsey rounded the coffee table and squatted to look at Molly's picture, a unicorn and a princess. "That's beautiful, Molly. Is that princess me? Or maybe it's you."

Molly giggled. "It's for you, but I don't know who she is. She's just a pretty princess."

"Very pretty. "You're going to love Treasure House today. Miss Joanne said it's a surprise, but I think it has something to do with *painting*..." She finished her phrase in a sing-song voice. Painting was one of Molly's favorite things.

Molly let out a loud squeal and pulled herself up from the floor. "I like painting." Then she frowned. "I don't work today?"

"Not today. You'll go on Monday and work with Miss Aggie on napkins and things."

"I like Miss Aggie."

"Me too." Aggie had owned The Grateful Fork Restaurant for forty years. And grateful was what Kelsey felt each time she went there to help. Her regular job consisted of remote online work for a medical records company, which registered below zero on her excitement scale. But a few times a week she took shifts at The Fork to help Aggie out. Well, filling in when they were short-staffed in the kitchen or with waitstaff was only *one* of her motivations. Another one was simply getting away from the house and computer, being around the upbeat energy of The Fork. *And* around food preparation and service, her happy place.

Along with that, she got a change from keeping an ever-watchful eye on Molly, who had been born with Downs Syndrome. Molly could be fairly independent, but Kelsey still took her responsibility seriously, her promise to take care of her older sister while their parents were away for a nine-month mission trip in Uganda.

After dropping Molly off at Treasure House, an innovative adult daycare, she drove to The Grateful Fork. That day, she'd wait tables. She preferred kitchen work, or overseeing the shift, but enjoyed the atmosphere either way—the people contact, the laughter, and the good smells flowing from the kitchen. One day, if she stayed on target with her heart, she'd have her own restaurant and she'd probably end up modeling it after The Grateful Fork. The thought brought a smile to her lips.

Kelsey pushed open the glass front door and greeted the hostess. The restaurant extended a homey welcome to those who entered under its turquoise awnings on Restaurant Row, as the locals called Charleston Alley, since a few more eateries lined the narrow street. Folk art and antique implements hung on the warm golden-yellow walls. In one corner was a stage for music groups who performed on Friday or Saturday evenings.

Stenciled over the pine-paneled bar near the ceiling were the words, *Give us this day our daily bread*. Aggie and Charles hadn't had children, but they'd had a dream to own a restaurant. Aggie had grown up hearing stories of food shortages in England during the Second World War from her mother, who had been a British war bride. This inspired the restaurant's name and, as Aggie said, reminded anyone who came in the door why they should be grateful.

The kitchen already buzzed with white-clad cooks moving briskly under bright lights. “Hi Aggie. Hi everyone.” Kelsey reached into a bin and laced a clean server's apron around her waist.

The woman paced through the kitchen, surveying large bubbling pots on the stove and making suggestions to the chefs. She turned to Kelsey. “Hello, Kelsey. Come over and try this sauce Vince just created. It's good.” Her dark hair streaked with silver framed a bird-like face webbed with wrinkles. Despite her seventy-two years, she always seemed to abound in energy and creativity. She and her late husband, Charles, had made The Fork a Brenner Falls institution.

“I'd love to.” Kelsey took the spoon of the creamy liquid.

“Guess what's in it, Kelss.” Burly Vince, head chef for the last twelve years, prompted her with an inviting smile. He frequently quizzed the savvy of her taste buds and cooking knowledge.

“I taste...” Kelsey moved her tongue around the creamy sauce. “It's not anise...Is it tarragon? And butter and lemon. And is that nutmeg too?”

“Yes, a pinch. I tried fennel, but the flavor competed too much with the tarragon. We'll use this over fish.”

“Rather fancy for The Fork.” Kelsey smiled. “Is it becoming haute cuisine around here?”

“Depends on the day,” Aggie said as she sat on a nearby stool. She waved Kelsey over. “Come here, dear. I want to tell you something.”

Kelsey went to Aggie's side and waited.

“I've decided I'm going to retire soon. I've been thinking about it for the last year, and it's time to pass the baton.”

Kelsey's smile fell. “Oh, Aggie. I don't know what to say.” Sudden sadness quivered inside, but she forced a supportive tone. “But of course, you deserve the fun and rest of retirement.

What...what will you do with The Fork? Sell it?" She held her breath. She had to admit, The Grateful Fork was a little like family to her.

Aggie shook her head. "I may do that eventually, but I'm not planning to right now." The woman took a long pause as her gaze laser-focused on Kelsey's. "I'd like you to think about something, Kelsey. I don't necessarily want you to give me an answer yet, but I thought about *you* taking over as manager."

Kelsey gasped and one hand went to her chest. "Me? Oh, Aggie." A surge of hope peaked then fell with a thud. "That's such an honor, and I'd absolutely love to. But...but I can't, not until my parents get home in November." Six more months. She couldn't ask Aggie to wait until Kelsey was ready for her dream job.

"Because of Molly?"

"Yes. Otherwise, I'd come in a heartbeat. You know I would." Kelsey wouldn't allow her mind to imagine managing the restaurant. The mental picture would only torture her, since it wouldn't happen.

Aggie offered a restrained smile and a nod. "Yes, I know, dear. I'd forgotten about the commitment you made to your parents. The job would be too demanding, I think, to give adequate care to Molly." She shrugged and let out a sigh. "Maybe it's best to keep it in our family, then. I also thought of asking Danielle to step in as manager. You know Danielle, my great-niece."

"Yes, we were in high school together."

"Well, she's been out of work for a couple months, since that IT job laid her off."

Kelsey swallowed. "Has she ever done this kind of work before? Being a restaurant manager is rather involved, isn't it?"

Aggie shrugged. "She's been around here and there. She's waitressed, she's been a hostess. I'll stay on for a bit to train her."

Danielle lived in a small apartment on the edge of town and Kelsey didn't see her often anymore. And she likely had *no* experience running a successful restaurant.

"It might be risky, Aggie, since she doesn't have experience," Kelsey said. It would be a shame to put The Fork into the hands of an unproven if well-meaning manager. "Hostess is one thing. Manager is quite another, but I don't need to tell you that."

Aggie waved the air. "After a month with me training her, she'll be fine. I mean *intensive* training. Danielle's smart. She'll catch on. And she'll have Vincent and Claire to rely on. They've been here forever."

Kelsey held down a sigh. She doubted Vince and Claire would be able to bring Danielle up to speed. They were chefs, not restaurant managers. They wouldn't have time to tutor Danielle in restaurant management.

With a sad smile, Kelsey laid her hand on the older woman's arm. "I'll miss you, Aggie."

"I'm not gone yet." Aggie chuckled. "But I'll still drop in from time to time. Are you working only lunch today?"

"Yes. I have to pick up Molly after my shift."

Aggie nodded. "How are your parents doing over in Africa?"

Though the topic had shifted, a lead ball of regret still lay in Kelsey's stomach. "They're enjoying it, even though it's hard sometimes. It's quite primitive where they are, in a remote village. We talk on the phone every month. They have to travel to a larger town to call us."

“I’m glad they’re able to stay in touch. They probably need it as much as you do.”

“That’s for sure. Well, I better get out there.”

The restaurant wasn’t too busy yet, so Kelsey could get her bearings. She forcibly pushed aside her disappointment at not being able to accept Aggie’s offer, as well as her misgivings about Danielle’s lack of experience. It was out of her hands. Instead, she took note of her section then went behind the bar to capture a moment of calm before the front door swung open and the lunch rush began.

Along the wall, a man sat at one of the empty tables filling out a job application, probably for dishwasher/bus boy. The job had been posted for over two weeks. He seemed old for that kind of job, maybe around thirty. Though she’d been in Brenner Falls all her life, she didn’t recognize him. Dark wavy hair curled below his ears around an olive complexion. Maybe he was passing through or had just moved to town.

Just then, he lifted his head, and his gaze found hers, as if he’d known she had noticed him. Her face grew warm. She offered a slight smile, then busied herself at the bar.

The man’s dark, serious expression stayed imprinted in her mind. Who was he? Why would a guy his age want a job washing dishes?

“Party of four at table six, Kelsey.” The words of the hostess caused Kelsey to spring into action.

Time went by quickly, since Kelsey didn’t stop moving for two hours. She didn’t think about the stranger again or notice when he left. The lunch shift started to wane until only a few customers remained. Time to finish up then scoot off to get Molly.

These days, she didn’t have much time for herself, unless Molly was occupied at the house with one of her hobbies. Kelsey had happily offered to take care of Molly while her parents were in Africa. They’d taken care of her all the preceding years. But it was tiring whether she was busy doing things for or with her sister or merely *thinking* about what Molly might need or an activity Kelsey could do with her. She could easily imagine how a working parent felt.

She’d pick up Molly and get her settled with her books. Then maybe Kelsey would have time to fiddle with one of her recipe inventions. She’d serve it for dinner, since Molly was usually a willing guinea pig for Kelsey’s culinary experiments. They could eat outside at the picnic table under the pine trees.

That mental picture of a peaceful Friday evening caused a layer of acceptance and calm to seep down inside, diluting her disappointment after Aggie’s news and the mismatch in timing for the manager role. It was clear that as perfect as the job seemed to her, it wasn’t meant to be. She had to accept that painful reality and keep going.