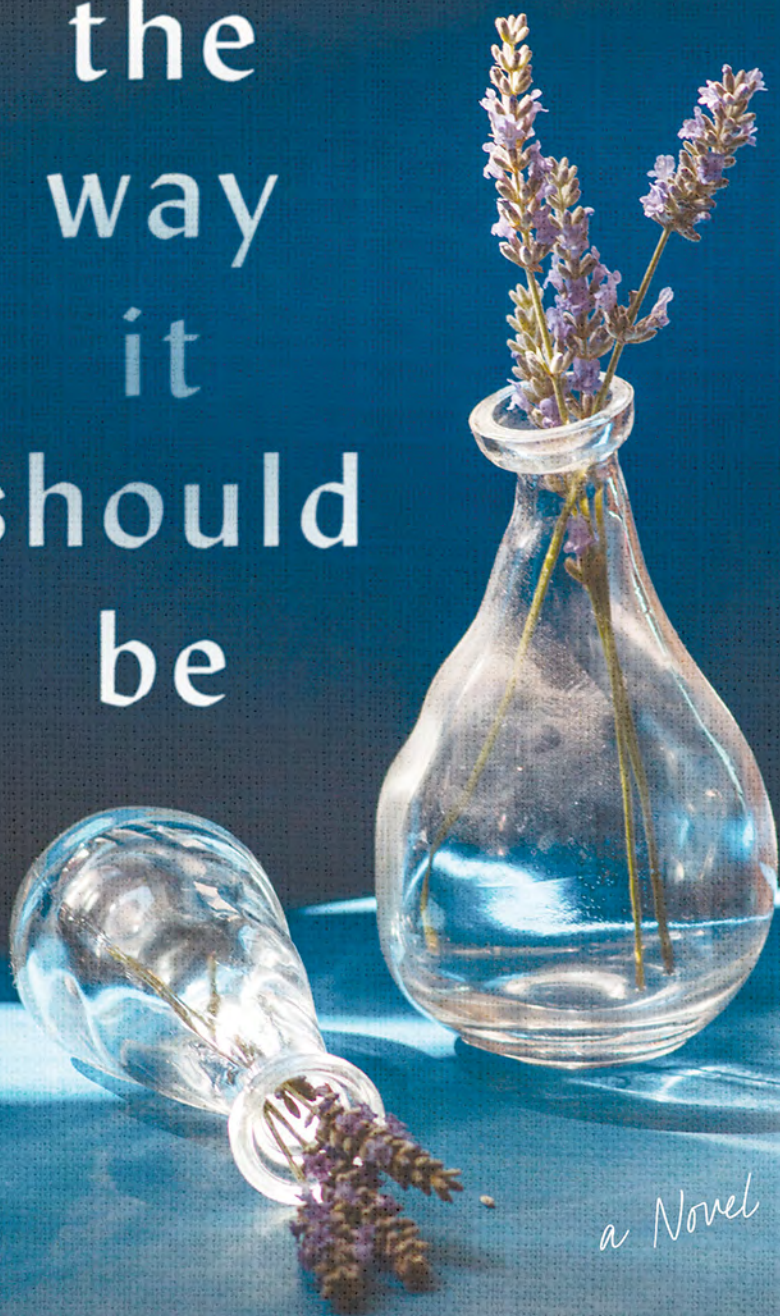


the
way
it
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be



a Novel

Author of *If We Make It Home*, a *Library Journal* Best Book of 2017

Christina Suzann Nelson

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This book is dedicated to
Ryan, Joshua, Aleasha, Emma, Makayla, and Violet.
The pieces of my heart.

CHAPTER ONE



THE MOST BEAUTIFUL THINGS are those that survive a storm and find their glory in the restoration. That thought came to Zara Mahoney's mind as she turned off the gravel lane and onto the farm—their farm, hers and Chad's. Most of the things she loved dearly, the items she'd brought with her through the years, were old and weathered. They showed the strain of time and the softening of experience. Even the 1968 Ford pickup she drove was what many would call a relic. But when she looked at its chipped teal paint, the smattering of rust, and the duct-taped bench seat, she saw resilience and strength.

That old house and overgrown land energized her. Underneath the layers of neglect, there was a future that she would share with her new husband. That place, though it looked fragile, wasn't an ending, but a great and powerful beginning.

Zara twirled the new set of keys around her index finger and scanned the overgrown twenty acres of land, Chad and Zara Mahoney's very own home.

She and Chad were college sweethearts. They'd met on campus outside the building where a few of her business courses and most of his accounting lectures were held. He was the first person who shared her excitement over her plans to take her degree in

business and minor in botany and grow them into a company that provided natural products made by her own hands. He'd even come up with the name, Zara's Garden.

Her fingers yearned to pull back the peeling white paint and hack away at the rambling blackberry bushes, but the treetops swirled as the wind picked up, pushing loose hair over her face. If she was going to get this load of boxes inside before the rain started and turned cardboard to mush, she couldn't stand around daydreaming. Not even as she caught a glimpse of purple crocuses emerging from the soil near the house's foundation. There would be time. A lifetime.

The key slid easily into the worn lock, clicking as it turned. The moist air of a Willamette Valley winter had swollen the wood, fitting the door and its frame together in a tight embrace. As Zara tugged a few more times, the knob slipped from her grip and the entrance flew open, almost throwing her off the brittle porch.

Beep, beep.

A mail truck bumped through the last of the potholes, inching toward her until it stopped a few feet away. The man who stepped out was the image of Santa Claus on a tropical vacation. His short-sleeved Hawaiian shirt pushed the limits of the buttons above his khaki pants. A fluffy white beard nearly covered his face, and shaggy hair tumbled from his head. "Hey there. You the new owner?"

"I am." She stretched her hand out to shake his. "I'm Zara Brookes." *Nope.* "I'm sorry. Zara Mahoney."

One crazy caterpillar eyebrow cocked.

"I . . . we just got married. Last week. My husband and I." The words were still new on her tongue and had a delightfully sweet taste.

He nodded. "Well then, congratulations, Mrs. Mahoney."

"I was heading to check the mailbox as soon as I finished unloading a few things. Sorry you had to come all the way down the driveway."

He rubbed the back of his neck. “I think I made it through without whiplash, but it was close.” His eyes smiled. Leaning into his truck, the man pulled out a mailbox door. “I thought you’d prefer to have your letters delivered rather than left to the wind and rain.” He handed Zara the warped metal with one hinge still attached. “It’s supposed to get nasty again by the end of the week.” His gaze lifted to the sky. “You’ve got to love these Oregon springs. The weather jumps around more than a toddler with a belly full of sugar.”

Zara took the salvaged material, mentally adding *mailbox* to her growing list of projects. “Yikes. The blessings of homeownership, huh?” She grinned. It would take a lot more than a broken mailbox to bring her down from the clouds today.

He bobbed his head. “Underneath it all, I think you picked a good one. This place has solid bones.” He climbed into the cab and handed a stack of letters through the window. “I’m looking forward to seeing what you do with the old house.”

“Thank you.” She waved as he drove away, the truck lurching from one side to the next on the uneven road.

Tossing the mailbox door into the bed of her pickup, Zara dropped the tailgate and tugged the first of her boxes into her arms, the mail stacked on top. By the time she made it through the front door, her biceps screamed. She’d wake up sore tomorrow, but this was so worth the pain. Tonight, she and Chad would have their very first dinner together in their new home.

Zara scrunched her nose as she ventured farther into the house. It had been shut up since they took their final walk-through a few weeks earlier. Now absent of the synthetic floral scents of room freshener, the inside smelled damp and mustier than it had on any of the visits with the real estate agent.

She lowered the box, letting it drop the last half foot onto the cracked tile, then tossed the mail on the counter. Chad would be home from his first mandatory meeting at Emerald and Irving

Financial in three hours. That's how long she had to make sure he didn't question this investment on their first night.

Zara's next load included two smaller boxes with a watery jar of seeds balanced on top. Water waved back and forth as she took the stairs into the house. On the kitchen threshold, she tripped, catching herself before she lost her grip. Four more steps forward, and Zara's toe rammed the first box, still sitting on the floor. Agony shot up through her shin, and the jar tumbled.

Glass shattered on impact with the unforgiving surface. Flat black seeds the size and shape of beetles flew to all corners of the kitchen. She had waited weeks for these treasures to arrive. If she had to wait for another batch, it would ruin her critical planting timeline.

Zara shoved the boxes onto another counter and slammed the door shut. As she did, the stack of mail lifted and fluttered to the floor, each piece drawing up glass-laced water.

Dropping to her knees, Zara picked up each seed while cold water on chilly tile saturated her jeans. More than a few seeds had floated under the edge of the cabinets. When Zara located the twenty-fifth and final holdout, she laid them on the worn grooved cutting board. The seeds needed to be relocated to trays of soil placed on a heating pad before she could start preparing Chad's and her celebratory dinner.

Yanking open the flaps on the largest box, Zara freed a few towels from the items they were protecting, then tossed them on the spreading pond underfoot.

With her thumb and forefinger, she picked up the pieces of mail and shook them over the sink. A bill for the previous owner, junk mail, a flyer, a welcome home card, and . . . her breath stilled. All the fragile fragments of her dreams shuddered. This was the one thing she'd taken for granted, not allowing fear and dysfunction to steal what she'd built. But all it took was a glance at this envelope for the past's hatred, sorrow, and loss to invade her new life.

Standing on legs that felt like they'd run a marathon, she rinsed her hands and towed them dry. There was nothing to be afraid of.

She reached for the envelope and tore it open. The letter, one side soaked in seed water, stuck to the inside, then finally came free. Zara read over the blurring words.

It was from her mother, an inmate in the women's correctional facility just a few hours north of Zara and Chad's new farm. How had she gotten the new address?

Zara could toss this in the trash, an action she almost always wished she'd done immediately after reading any of her mother's spiteful notes, which let old hurts rise to the surface once again.

Yet with the pain, sweet memories of her little brother came back in a rush, followed by the bottomless grief of losing him. Every tiny bit of Tyson had been a precious gift, everything except for the gene that ultimately took his young life and destroyed their family. She and her sister, Eve, had only been fourteen when he died.

Zara's phone buzzed. She snatched it from the counter and answered.

"Is this Zara Brookes?" The voice on the other end sounded professional but not in a let-me-sell-you-something kind of way.

"It is." She didn't correct the last name.

"Hello, Zara. This is Collette from Dr. Mackenzie's office. He asked me to call you with the results of your recent tests."

Zara's heart fluttered. "Okay." The shaking in her voice only sent her nerves further into panic, even though her doctor had said this was the responsible thing to do. Before they started a family, Chad and Zara should know for sure if she was a carrier for the gene that had caused her brother's death. These tests would put the niggling questions away, not letting them poke at her like splinters for the rest of her life.

"Everything looked good as far as your health goes, but I'm afraid you did test positive as a carrier for Hunter syndrome."

Positive.

The letter, still in one hand, drifted to the floor.

Tears washed over her cheeks and crumpled her fragile hope. It had only taken a second to destroy her fairy-tale future.

She ended the call, picked up the paper, and stuffed it into a bag she'd use for trash.

A DARK CLOUD seemed to have covered the sun. No matter what Zara did, the seriousness of that one word permeated every movement she made. *Positive*.

Zara opened a box of jars in a room that might have been used for dining in the farmhouse's heyday. Each glass container appeared colored by the dried herbs stored inside. She lined them up on a folding table she'd erected along a wall. One by one, Zara unscrewed the lids, inhaling the fragrance of the individual plants.

Lavender was a favorite. It softened the sharp points of her drifting thoughts. She left the top off this container, as well as that for the dried rose petals. Within a few hours, those scents would permeate the room, reviving the stale air.

They'd need to add plenty of shelving in here. But before that, she'd coat these walls with fresh paint. And prior to that, Zara would need to repair the deep divots in the worn and chipped plaster.

Her vision for this room, and nearly every other square foot of the farm, emerged from her imagination already detailed and clear, a design etched in the depths of her mind. What she didn't see, the part she kept trying to push away, was how she'd afford all this if Chad decided her brokenness was more than their wedding vows covered. And how she would survive another loss of that magnitude.

Zara bent forward, her hands clutching at her chest. Chad Mahoney was the best part of her day. He was the first person

to really choose her and care about her dreams. But that same man wanted a large family, a dog, the picket fence, the loud and crazy of it all.

The reality of Hunter syndrome would steal their joy just like it took her brother's life, her twin's sobriety, and her mother's last bit of mental health. Zara couldn't watch it take Chad's dreams too.

"Hey there." His voice boomed through the unfurnished house. "Where are you?"

Zara blinked back tears she hadn't bothered with before, then yanked her cell phone from her pocket. He was an hour earlier than expected. And she wasn't ready to face him.

"There you are." The floor groaned under his feet as Chad entered the room and wrapped his arms around her. "The honeymoon ruined me. I couldn't wait to get back to you." He nuzzled closer. "It's kind of chilly in here. Did you turn on the heat?"

Zara relaxed against his chest. "I've been working. Didn't even notice it getting colder."

Chad held her at arm's length. "I've got a surprise for you." His grin creased tiny lines around his eyes. "Come see." Dropping one of her hands, he pulled her forward by the other.

Outside, the air had turned damp and icy. It wove through the knit of Zara's long-sleeved T-shirt, and goose bumps burst out along her arms. "What is it?" She wriggled her fingers free from his grip and hugged herself.

Two feet away from his nearly new SUV, Chad stopped and turned toward her. Evening was closing in, but light from the farmhouse window reflected in his eyes. "Are you ready?"

Zara blew out a breath, which turned into a puff of steam. "I'm ready to head inside." The sarcastic tone in her voice scratched at her nerves until she punctuated her words with a smile. "Okay. Let me see what you brought."

He gave a boyish grin. "It's not so much a *what* as a *who*."

Tiny bubbles tickled her stomach. She glided past Chad and

pulled open the hatch, revealing a small crate. “What is it?” Zara’s fingers trailed over the rough plastic exterior.

“I guess you’d better take a look.” As Chad pulled the crate toward the bumper, something inside moved.

In the shadows, she could just make out a ball of brown fluff. Pinching the latch, she released the crate’s door, then reached in for the softest puppy she’d ever felt. Holding him to her face, she inhaled the sweet scent emanating from him.

The puppy yawned, then snuffled into her neck as if his nap had been cut short.

“You got me a puppy.” Zara looked up at Chad, but her vision blurred. All her life, she’d wanted a puppy. The closest she’d managed was walking an elderly neighbor’s even more elderly dog each morning when she was in middle school. That stopped when the woman’s family moved them both away. “Thank you.”

“I worry about you out here on your own while I’m at work.” He shrugged. “Now that I really look at him, though, he might not have been a wise choice for a watchdog.”

“I love him.” The dog’s hot breath warmed the side of her face.

“You go on inside. I have his supplies in the back seat.” Chad planted a kiss on her cheek and rubbed his hand over the puppy’s head.

A drop of rain plopped onto Zara’s right shoulder, and cold shuddered across her back. She pressed the little dog closer to her chest, her hand cupped over his head like a cap, and jogged back to the house.

Inside, Zara switched on the thermostat. A moment later, the house filled with the scent of burning dust and dry heat. It brought back early childhood memories of her grandparents’ cabin, a tiny, musty place in the middle of the Cascade Pass. Zara and her twin sister had dreamed of living out there one day.

So many things and people were gone now.

Chad shook off his jacket and laid it over the back of a chair. “The dog food is on the porch. Where should I put the crate?”

Her eyes locked on his. She knew loss. She'd survived it countless times, but the desire to keep her new truth hidden and put off the pain of possibly losing Chad was almost more than she could withstand.

"Zara?" The skin above his nose pinched. "The crate?"

"By the wood stove is fine for now." In only a few minutes, she'd let her heart get hijacked by a ten-pound ball of fluff. Over-attachment had to be an authentic disorder. She couldn't bear the thought of putting him in that doggy dungeon.

"He's going to need a name." Chad set down the crate and scratched the back of his head. "And it shouldn't be anything on my list for our future children."

Zara's stomach twisted. "We need to talk." She sat on the floor, her gaze remaining glued to the perfect distraction. "I went ahead with the genetic testing."

Chad's presence behind her was a tower standing ready to collapse and land on her head. "The one for Hunter syndrome? I thought we'd decided it wasn't necessary since Tyson had a different father."

"I just thought it would be good to get it done, like having the test would protect us from something. Turns out, it didn't."

"You're saying it came back positive?" His words were steady but squeezed.

"Having a different dad didn't save me. I got a call from my doctor today. I'm a carrier." The puppy ran over and slid into her bent leg. "I'm so sorry, Chad. I should have found out earlier, before we got married or even serious."

"Is there a cure or a treatment? What do you know about Hunter syndrome?" He sat behind her, wrapping his arms around her chest and pulling Zara close to him. "Maybe it's not such a big thing anymore."

Always the one with the positive outlook. Zara couldn't fault him for that. He didn't know the world the way she did.

"A woman I work with is married to a genetic specialist," he

offered. “We’ll make an appointment. We just need more information.”

She’d go with him, but only to soften the blow.

The puppy sniffed a clump of spilled sage, lifted his nose, and peed on the floor.