

A person in a red jacket stands in a field of purple flowers, looking out over a sunset landscape with mountains in the distance. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow. The overall scene is peaceful and contemplative.

A
FLICKER
of
LIGHT

A Novel

KATIE POWNER

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◆ *To Julia Marie (Leskiw) Reis* ◆

*When I see a high-top shoe
A teddy bear or red canoe
I think of you*

ONE



Secrets are like pennies. Everybody's got one, even the poorest among us. Some are new and shiny, and some are tarnished and worn smooth from age. I should've tossed mine in the Gallatin River years ago so I couldn't pull it out and turn it over in my hand, wondering why. Wondering if.

But I didn't.

"June? You out here?"

The screen door creaks as Rand steps onto the porch, and I tuck my secret away. He eases himself into the wooden rocker beside mine.

"It's nice yet."

I nod. Fall is in the air, but today the sun is shining over the valley, and the mountain standing tall and proud before us is still blue. Soon it will be sharp and white, but today it almost looks friendly. I've lived here long enough to know it isn't.

Rand reaches over and places a gnarled hand over mine. I like the weight of it, anchoring me.

"I'm waiting for the light."

This time he nods. "You talk to Mitch today?"

"No."

I've been meaning to call my son. Rand reminds me every

morning. But fear holds me back. I don't want to leave my home.

"There it is." I point at the mountain as if Rand can't see with his own eyes the light that appears there as the setting sun hits just the right position in the sky.

Rand's already-wrinkled face crinkles further as he smiles. "Wonder what the old codger's up to tonight?"

I squeeze his hand. "Searching for treasure, of course."

"Ah yes. Of course."

The old tale comforts me. When Mitch was little, I would say, "Look! Miner McGee turned his headlamp on," and Mitch would frown and ask, "Does Miner McGee really live up there?" Always skeptical, he was. But not Bea. No, when Mitch's daughter came along, my only grandchild, she would beg me to tell the story over and over, drinking it like water. She never questioned why an old man would live up there alone. Never questioned why the light only appeared on sunny days. Her only concern was, "What if he never finds the Big Sky Diamond?"

"He will," I would say. "He'll never give up."

The sun sinks lower, and the light disappears. The story fades away. First Mitch grew up and out of the story, then Bea.

I wonder what my son is doing.

Rand's boots scrape against the ancient porch as he struggles out of his seat. "You comin'?"

"In a minute."

He plods back into the house, his right leg dragging a little behind. His shoulders stooped under the burden of seventy-one years of hard living. Lord Almighty, I love that man. Forty-four years together and I've never wanted any other life. Never wondered if we could weather any storm Montana threw our way.

Until now.

TWO



Bea Michaels rubbed her eyes, blinked three times, and looked again. Yep. The two blue lines were still there. “Hot coffee.” Her version of a much stronger term fell a little flat. “Hot, hot, hot, hot coffee.”

A rush of emotions crowded her heart. Her whole body. Joy, fear, confusion, anxiety, and amazement battled for control, flushing her cheeks and tingling her toes. This couldn’t be real. Couldn’t be true. But the little white stick said it was.

She was going to be a mom.

A strangled cry-laugh welled up from her throat, and she covered her mouth with one hand. Tears pricked her eyes. There was a baby inside her. Right at this very moment, her and Jeremy’s child was growing. But she wasn’t much more than a kid herself, was she? Even though she’d turned twenty-one a couple months ago, she’d never felt less like an adult.

She thought she’d have more time to prepare. More confidence about the future. More . . . something.

The sound of the apartment door slamming made her jump. Jeremy was home. But she wasn’t ready to face him. She didn’t know how to do this.

Why did you leave me, Mom? She gasped for breath and covered her face with her hands.

He found her standing in the bathroom, bawling.

“Whoa, Bea.” He ran to her and gently put his hands on her shoulders. “Are you okay? What’s the matter?”

“Y-yes.” She worked to force words out between sobs. “I don’t know. My m-mom will never . . . n-never . . .”

His face softened, and he pulled her close. “You’re missing your mom today?”

“No!” she wailed and wriggled out of his arms. Why was she blubbering like this? She wasn’t raised to blubber. “I mean, yes. But—but—look.”

Since her words wouldn’t cooperate, she held up the white stick.

Jeremy stared at it dumbly. “Um . . .”

“It’s a pregnancy test.”

His eyes widened.

She wiped at her tears. Swiped her nose with her sleeve. Enough with the crying already. “It’s positive.”

“You mean . . . ?” He searched her face for the truth.

“Yes.” She started crying again. “You’re going to be a daddy.”

Wonder transformed his expression, giving her heart a little lift. She managed a shaky smile, and he shouted a questionable word.

She swatted his arm. “Don’t swear.”

“Sorry.” He slid an arm around her waist and shook his head. “I couldn’t help it.”

Bea looked down at her stomach. “But she’ll hear you.”

He knelt so his face was level with her belly. “She, huh?”

Bea took a deep breath. She could do this. “Or he. Or one of each. Who knows?”

He stood and gave her a solemn look. “Hot coffee.”

“Exactly.” Her swollen eyes grew wide. “The hottest.”

He reached for her. “With a double shot of espresso.”

She leaned into him. “I just can’t believe it.”

He wrapped his arms tightly around her and laid his head on

top of hers. She breathed him in, thankful for his presence. His strength. For a few minutes, it was silent in their tiny bathroom except for the drip, drip, drip of the faucet their landlord had never fixed.

When Jeremy spoke, his voice was heavy. “You’re sad because your mom’s not here for this.”

Bea nodded into his chest. Sometimes he understood her feelings better than she did, despite a childhood filled with dysfunction and neglect. Or perhaps because of it.

“She’ll never get to meet her. Or him.” Her husband’s cotton shirt muffled Bea’s voice. “She would’ve loved being a grandma.”

In some ways, the last two years had flown by. Their whirlwind romance. Jeremy’s college graduation. The wedding. But in other ways, it had been the longest two years of her life. Mom had been her best friend. Her confidant. The cancer took her so fast, it didn’t even seem real sometimes. How would she get through this without her?

“I’m scared.”

It wasn’t something anyone in her family ever liked to admit, but it was a relief to say the words out loud. Jeremy released his hold on her and touched his forehead to hers. “Me too.”

She avoided his eyes. “And you know what this means.”

He took a step back and sighed. “Don’t call him yet.”

“But—”

“Let’s just enjoy this for the weekend. I’ll take you to dinner tomorrow to celebrate, anywhere you want. You can talk to him Monday.”

Bea grabbed his hand and squeezed. The thought of food didn’t hold much appeal. It had been her queasy stomach five days in a row that made her first suspect she might be pregnant. But talking to her dad didn’t hold much appeal, either.

“Okay.”

She let Jeremy lead her out of the bathroom into the small

living room that doubled as a dining room and connected to the kitchenette. He coaxed her onto the futon and insisted on making dinner. She smiled on the inside. He was going to be a good dad. But . . .

Would she be a good mother?

More tears began to fall. *Mother*. Such an innocent-sounding word, but it rang like a tornado siren in her mind. Her mother was gone. And the way her dad shut her out after? Well, it was almost like she'd lost them both.

She'd been getting used to how it was just her and Jeremy. Two hearts against the world. Free to do whatever they wanted. Free to chart their own course into the future. But now she watched Jeremy move around the kitchen and thought about the mold they'd found in the bedroom carpet. The electrical fire they'd recently experienced when the oven shorted out. The bad news they'd received from Jeremy's employer this week.

They couldn't stay here. Everything was about to change.

Again.

She rested her hands on her stomach. This was it. She was having a baby.

Hot coffee.