

*Yours Truly,
Thomas*



RACHEL FORDHAM



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

For Dad-

Thank you for sliding letters under my door
when I was a stubborn teenager and for so much more.

For Mom-

Who read me stories when I was little
and reads all of mine now.

A girl couldn't ask for better parents.

Love you both.



We can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.

—C. S. Lewis



Prologue

*A*fter letting an involuntary squeal escape, Penny pulled the yellowed papers closer and pressed her lips to them. Then she began to devour the words.

My Darling,

I've been away only a fortnight and already I feel a deep ache for you. I dream at night of your beautiful face, and sometimes I reach out and try to touch it. The two of us were meant to never be apart.

Penny stopped reading and sighed as she rolled onto her side, careful not to bump the mahogany frame of the bed under which she lay. She closed her eyes.

In her mind's eye, she was much older than her ten years, taller, and womanly. She wore a long green dress made of silk and taffeta that matched her eyes perfectly and fit each curve like a glove. The dress swished as she walked, and when she spun around, it flowed like a perfect ocean wave.

A man approached. He was tall and handsome. “My darling,” he said. Then he took her hand and kissed the back of it.

She slowly opened her eyes and stared at the flickering light of the lantern.

She’d discovered the stack of letters the day before while playing hide-and-seek with the maid’s children. Since laying eyes on them, she’d thought of nothing but getting to them and reading every word again and again.

After eating dinner the next day, she’d crept away, telling her parents she was tired and wanted to sleep. Instead, she’d rushed to her parents’ room, slid between the carved legs of their four-poster bed, and pushed herself underneath where she’d found the box of worn papers.

Penny cringed, knowing she’d been deceitful.

“Penny?” Her father’s voice came into the room. “Penny, I know you’re in here somewhere. The staff saw you enter the room. I’m afraid you’ve been caught.”

She blew out the lantern as quickly as she could and pulled her legs in tight. Perhaps if she held her breath and closed her eyes, she’d not be found. She opened her eyes a sliver when she heard a tapping noise. The tip of her father’s boot was visible beneath the bedding.

“How strange it is that my daughter is not in her room and that she was seen entering mine.” Her father’s foot continued to tap against the floorboard. “I wonder what she could be up to. It’s not like my girl to be keeping secrets from me.”

Guilt gnawed at her conscience. Her father was her dearest friend. To lose his trust would be unbearable. She pushed her toes against the floor, propelling her forward so that her head poked out from under the bed. “I’m here.”

Her father lowered himself to the floor and sat beside her. He

pursed his lips. His dark eyes did not look angry though. They remained the same kind, patient eyes she had known her whole life. “Are you hiding from me or something else? We haven’t bandits around, have we?”

Penny pulled herself the rest of the way from under the bed. “No bandits.” With her head bowed, she handed him the letters. “I took these. I’m sorry. I know I shouldn’t have, but I wanted to read them so badly. I was afraid you’d say no and I’d never see what they said.”

The letters looked so small in his large hands. He took a deep breath. “There are personal things in these letters. I wrote them for your mother’s eyes only. You may not understand it now, but some words are meant only for a man and a wife.” He paused. Then he laughed softly as he brushed at a cobweb that had entwined itself with her hair. “Seems we need to hire you to clean beneath the beds.”

He flipped the letters back and forth in his hands. “I should be angry you took these.”

Penny eased closer to her father. So close she could smell the sweet scent of his shaving soap and touch his suit jacket.

“But I’m not.”

Relieved to not be in trouble, she let out a puff of air. “I dream about love. But what does it really mean to love someone?”

He smiled. “I love your mother.” He tilted his head toward her as though he were sharing a brilliant secret. “If I finish my work early enough, I stop by the candy shop. I buy you a stick of penny candy because you like it and because you’re my lucky Penny. I buy your mother maple candy. It’s her favorite. When I bring it to her, I like to sneak up behind her and tell her to close her eyes. She acts surprised even though she knows I’ve brought her a sweet.”

“That’s love? Candy?” She looked at the stack of letters, wishing she could read them. Surely, they had a simpler explanation.

“Yes. That and so much more. Love’s . . . well, love is candy and walks underneath a starlit sky. It’s babies and . . . it’s trying to make the other person’s life better. It’s many things.”

Her father tapped the tip of her nose, which made her smile. Was that love too?

“You should believe in love. It’s real. It’s all around you, just in different forms. You’ll see as you grow. You’ll realize that not all love looks like the love I have for your mother. Don’t you worry. I’ll be here to teach you all about love.” He stood up with the letters in hand. “I better go tell your mother that you’re not lost. She worries about you.”

Penny rolled her eyes. “I don’t know why.”

“Her worrying—that’s love too.”

“I’m not sure I like that kind of love. I want dancing and ball gowns and candy love.” She stood and brushed the dust from the front of her dress.

“You’ll look lovely in a ball gown. And there’s nothing wrong with sweets every now and then, but keep your eyes open.” He winked at her. “You don’t want to miss the love that’s perfect for you just because you’re too busy searching for a fairy tale.”

Penny furrowed her brows. She wasn’t sure she liked the practical spin her carefree father was putting on her romantic notions. “I suppose I’ll have to grow up first before I know what it’s like.”

“I think that’s an excellent idea.” He put a hand on her shoulder. “Now no more snooping around.”

She agreed.

“And one more thing. Promise me that when you think you’ve found yourself a love match, you’ll tell me all about him.”

Once again, she agreed. “I’ll tell you everything.”



WASHINGTON, DC, 1883

Dear Clara,

I lied. I told myself I had run westward for the promise of big sky and fertile soil. But the truth is, I just ran. I thought if Virginia were behind me, then I'd be able to leave you there. I thought if I was far enough away, then my heart would heal or at least forget. I thought I would be able to close my eyes and see something other than your face. I was wrong. You are everywhere. All around me and especially inside me. My heart hurts so deeply. If only I could go back and begin again, then perhaps there'd be a way to escape the agony.

I rode a train for a few days, then joined a group of settlers with their wagons. I suppose the idea of a wagon and horses would be amusing to you. No doubt, the very idea of it would earn me a soft giggle from you. I can almost hear the sound of it in my mind. Even to me the idea seems humorous.

I didn't make it west, at least not as far as I'd planned.

We had only just begun the wagon journey when my wagon tipped, leaving me with bumps and bruises. I blame the horses, but it may have been my fault. So many things are. The damage was not repairable and so the party moved on without me. I could board a train and ride it farther west, but I think I'll wait for a new wagon. Then I can see the country as I go. Perhaps the agony of the wait and the slow journey will be some sort of penance or liberation. I know not. I expect this pain I carry in my heart will follow me wherever I go. I know, though, that before I ran west, I'd never paused and looked around me so often as I did during the few days I rode the trail. I never knew how vast and wide the world is or how incredibly small I am. Alexandria had always been my everything, but there is more out there. A whole world I'd thought nothing of.

So, here I am in a strange little town that consists of a few dusty streets surrounded by endless fields. I've taken up residency in the local boardinghouse. It's a ghastly yellow building with a bright red door that always smells of baked bread and lye soap. The smell is welcoming enough, but I still feel a bit like a foreigner in someone else's land. New sights, new noises, new people. Only the unrelenting ache in my chest remains the same. That ache I carry is for you and for dreams of what might have been. This is not the life I ever wanted. I see you in the town. I see you in my mind. And each time I see you, the ache worsens. Why does it have to be this way? I've decided that living with the constant shadow of what might have been is the hardest lot to bear. Regrets are

heavy, horribly heavy. I tried to hide from them, but they followed me.

*Lost and running,
Thomas*

Penny leaned her head against the back of her chair and sighed. She pressed a hand to her own heart. It ached, just as Thomas's did. Out of loneliness, regret, and on occasion, despair. She tilted her head toward the far wall of the dead letter office and let her eyes roam across a matted and framed map of the country. When her father was still alive, they'd dreamed of travel, of adventure. His eyes had always twinkled when he spoke of riding out of the city, away from the hustle of life. Penny looked away. Like Thomas's dreams, they were only regrets now. Her father was gone. And, oh, how she wished he were here. If only she could run to him and tell him her woes and plead with him for advice. It was not to be. She was a clerk struggling to pay bills and nothing more.

During her three years at the dead letter office, she had learned to spot the correspondence of lovers. The letters full of syrupy words and flowery endearments were distracting. No, she craved the letters that captured the heart of the writer. Letters that revealed the depth of their love and strength of their promises, that allowed her for a moment to believe there was something more than toiling endlessly to survive. Thomas's words rang true, and despite his sorrow, he seemed a man full of heart. A man capable of loving someone deeply.

Penny looked again at Thomas's letter. The paper was plain and unscented. A ripple just below the name had caught her eye. Running her thumb over it now, she could feel where the

paper had warped. A tear perhaps. Was his heart so broken that he had wept as he wrote? What it must be like to have a man so in love that he'd shed tears for you.

Sitting with the letter in her hands was almost enough to make the rows of desks filled with hard-working clerks fade away. She closed her eyes and pictured another place, somewhere outside of DC, where there was a man whose heart was beating for another. Without a single clue about Thomas's physical appearance, she pictured him. A broken man bent over his desk, writing the desires and despair of his heart. She could almost smell the scent of sourdough bread baking, and out the window she saw golden fields of wheat. His hand painstakingly transcribing the pain he carried within.

"Look, Dinah." She leaned toward her friend and fellow clerk. "This one is from Thomas to Clara. He left her for the West, but I can tell he longs for her to join him." She pressed the letter to her heart. "Or for her to beckon him back. It's oddly romantic, isn't it? A man separated from his love."

"It's just a letter. I don't think it's overly romantic," Dinah whispered.

"No, it's more than a letter. It's this man's life. And now his life is in my hands. I have to help Clara get to him."

"You're just a clerk." Dinah rolled her eyes. The two had a long-standing friendship despite their many differences. "I don't believe the job requires matchmaking."

Penny shook her head. "I can't explain it. Some of the letters call to me and others do not." She let out a heavy sigh. Dinah's practical nature would never allow her to understand. Everything about Dinah was calculated and well thought out, from the stiff brown skirt she wore to the tight bun on her head. She certainly wasn't one to be swept away by emotions. "I feel as

though their love story depends on me. If I do nothing, he could spend months, years even, waiting for his true love. Always wondering.” Penny’s throat tightened. “No one should have to live with regrets. I understand about life going differently than we want it to. In a small way it’s as though I can feel his pain.”

“You aren’t supposed to care so much.” Dinah shook her head. “We’re allowed to open the letter so we can find clues to return them or get them to their intended recipient. Not so we can marvel over the contents. Or get teary-eyed over them. His life is not in your hands, a letter is. That’s all.”

Penny brought the letter closer to her face and once again admired the penmanship. “Wanting to help them is not against the rules.”

Dinah set down the letter she’d been reading. “This is just a job.” She motioned around the large room, with its rows of desks, walls of bins and barrels, and endless clerk resources. “It’s a job. Thomas will never blame you. He doesn’t even know you exist. Just put it in the disposal bin if you can’t redirect it.”

Penny’s heart lurched at the thought. The sadness, the finality of admitting defeat and dropping a letter in *that* bin was enough to make her sick. Still, she had to do it over and over again. So many letters were just . . . dead.

Dinah smoothed her neatly twisted auburn hair. Nothing in her countenance seemed shaken. “Some letters are not meant to make it. I suppose you could say some love stories aren’t meant to either. It’s always been that way.”

“It shouldn’t be.” Penny folded her arms across her chest as though her act of defiance could change the realities of romance or life.

“You shouldn’t get too upset over it when it wasn’t yours to worry about.”

Penny groaned as she watched a fellow clerk walk to the disposal bin and drop a letter in. The room full of clerks went on sorting, unaffected, as if it meant nothing. Their daily toiling over the mail had to mean something.

“Here’s Thomas’s letter.” She held it out toward Dinah. “It’s neatly addressed, so I don’t understand why it didn’t make it.”

“There’s no street listed.”

“The postmaster must know Clara Finley of Alexandria. Alexandria is not so big. I’d return it to Thomas, but he left no return address or last name, and he doesn’t say where he’s gone.” She pursed her lips as she examined the letter once more. “I could possibly figure it out if I researched where wagon trains pass through, and he does mention the color of the boardinghouse. But that wouldn’t help me get the letter to Clara.” She turned the letter over in her hands, scouring it in a vain attempt to find something she’d missed.

Dinah shrugged. “Who knows why she didn’t get it. Perhaps she moved. Or married someone else.”

“What if this lost letter ruins their lives?”

“If their lives are ruined because of one misplaced letter, so be it.” Dinah looked over her shoulder. “We need to get back to work before Mr. Douglas comes.”

“Mr. Douglas is still in his private office. He said forty percent of the letters we get make it out of here. I wish that number were higher. I think Mr. Douglas worries more about the valuables than the letters. Otherwise he’d give us more time to research the clues, like yellow boardinghouses.”

“Of course he does. How else would the national treasury survive?” Dinah stifled a laugh. Both women knew that unclaimed items were auctioned off, bringing in a large profit. “Here, give me that letter and I’ll drop it in the bin for you. I

need to take this stack anyway.” She reached out her hand. “I know you despise the disposal bin.”

“I do hate it.” Penny didn’t give the letter up. “Mr. Douglas is forever talking about not throwing out valuables, but isn’t the relationship between a man and a woman more valuable than his precious coins and trinkets?”

“Perhaps to Thomas, but not to the department.” Dinah grabbed the letter from Penny, walked the short distance to the bin, and tossed it in. “If there was no information to help you forward it on, assume it wasn’t meant to be. You can’t waste an entire day just to return it to him. It’s ridiculous. And we both know we can’t risk our jobs over silly sentiments. He’ll either write again or they’ll go their separate ways.”

Penny frowned, sighed, and then grabbed a new letter. The outside was marked “address unknown.” Penny fussed over the outside label for a few minutes, hoping to discover something from it. Then she slid the thin blade of the letter opener under the seal.

“Hopefully it’s not a boring one.” Dinah shifted in her seat. “The last one I read was about a litter of puppies. Two pages about their colors and habits. I was sure I’d fall asleep. Who would pay to send such news?”

“I think puppies are worthy creatures to write about. I’d hardly call them dull.”

Dinah laughed. “Of course you do. We all know how you feel about Honeysuckle.”

“She *is* the greatest dog in the world.” Penny smiled at the change in conversation.

“She may be a great dog, but her name is rather silly.”

“My father let me name her. I thought it was darling. Who doesn’t love honeysuckle?” Penny sat a little taller. “I think her

name fits her. I still remember my father bringing me Honey and telling me she was mine. Life was so much sweeter then. I wonder sometimes if he knew he was going to die.”

“How long after you got Honey did your father die?”

“A year. She’s been my solace and confidant since. I’d perish from the monotony of life if it was not for her.” She glanced away, the pangs of grief assaulting her. “My father often laughed when he heard me call her Honeysuckle. He liked the name.”

“Are you certain he wasn’t laughing at that dog’s long hair?”

Penny pursed her lips. “No, we kept her hair short then.”

“I’m glad you have Honeysuckle. Even if she does have an odd name.” Dinah folded the letter she was holding. “What’s your letter about?”

Penny smoothed the creased paper she’d been holding. “It’s from a woman to her friend. Something about a banquet and a new dress.”

“Postal workers, be sure your conversations are relevant.” Mr. Douglas stepped out of his private office, his arms folded across his chest. An all-too-familiar frown graced his stern face.

Penny ducked her head and started reading. She had to wade through sentence after sentence of boring drivel before she found a clue. The name of the town’s new library, the Tyler York Library. All she had to do was find out where that library was located and send the letter on to the town’s postmaster.

If only she could have gotten Thomas’s letter to Clara as easily. She frowned.

“Don’t be gloomy,” Dinah whispered. “I see it on your face. You’re still feeling bad about the other letter.”

“I wish I could have sent it on. I know you think I take this all too seriously, but I can’t seem to stop caring.”

“I envy you, I do. You can read an address that looks like nonsense and know exactly what it’s supposed to say.” Dinah reached over and patted Penny’s hand. “You’re good at this even if you couldn’t find a way to send that one along.”

Penny forced a smile. “I couldn’t survive a day at this place without you. I know I ought to be endlessly thankful for the respectable work, but some days all I see are the endless piles of paper.”

“You’d be fine without me now, but remember that first week? You spent most of it in tears. You’d read a letter and suddenly be brokenhearted because a stranger’s dog had died or their crops had failed.”

“It was the letters’ fault. Some of them were so sad. Or they made me angry.” She scowled, remembering the first letter she’d ever read that confessed a grievous sin. She was distraught for days worrying about someone else’s transgression. “But Thomas’s letter was different. It wasn’t something out of my control, like a dog or the crops. If the letter were delivered, two people might get to share a future together.”

“I wish it were that simple.” Dinah sorted the letters on her desk. “Did you hear about LaVern Hinckley?”

“No. Tell me.” Penny looked over her shoulder toward red-headed LaVern. “Her beau informed her he no longer wants to court her.” Dinah folded her arms across her chest. “Like I told you, broken hearts happen. Your Thomas and Clara might have broken things off even if there was no lost letter. It’s how life is.”

“It’s horrible. LaVern is beautiful and so sweet. I’ve never heard her utter a single unkind word.” Penny scanned the room. “LaVern talks to Rex Beck often at work. Maybe he’ll be the balm she needs.”

“Rex Beck is an old retired clergyman.”

Penny gasped as she turned her head this way and that, trying to get a glimpse of Rex. “No. He looks so young.”

“He’s at least fifty. He just has a young face. I hear he isn’t very good with the letters.”

“Why do they keep Rex if he isn’t very good? They let women go so easily if they don’t get a knack for the work.”

Dinah leaned in and whispered, “Mr. Douglas believes all the money that passes through here would be too tempting to the average man. So he hires retired clergy and women.” She smirked. “I guess our femininity alone is enough to vouch for our integrity. I think he keeps people like Rex around to keep everyone’s consciences alive. Everyone knows, though, that it’s us women who are the ones doing the work. I think Roland is the only man who earns his wages.”

Both girls snickered at the truthfulness of Dinah’s words.

“Even if it is a strange and thankless job, it’s better than taking in washing or working in a factory,” Dinah said.

Penny grinned. “So much better. But I think if I could choose, I’d do something outside. I don’t know what, but wouldn’t it be lovely to be outside in the sunshine? Fresh air all around you. Or maybe go to sea and feel the fresh, salty air blow against your skin. What would you pick if you could do anything?”

“I’m not the dreamer you are. I’m content enough with what I have.”

“There must be something you want.”

Dinah tapped her pencil against the desk. “I do think I’d like a life away from my father’s apartment. I’d stay here longer every day if I could. It seems more and more he’s on a rampage about something or other.”

“Someday you’ll have a house of your own,” Penny whispered. “I know you will. And it’ll be peaceful.”

“Ladies.” Mr. Douglas walked through the room again. “Let’s keep our conversations to a minimum. There are letters to sort.”

His eyes narrowed in Penny’s direction. She flashed him an innocent smile, then bent over the letter in her hands and set to work. When his back was turned, she whispered, “Someday you’ll be free of Mr. Douglas and your father.”

Dinah squeezed Penny’s hand. “And you’ll be at peace with your mother. And someday I hope you find a man who makes your heart flutter and writes you heart-wrenching love letters.”



“Penelope? Is that you? You’re late.” Penny’s mother, Florence, greeted her when she stepped into the small rented apartment.

“I was at the library,” Penny said.

“Every night you work late despite my telling you to hurry home.” Florence’s face puckered in disgust. “You’re twenty-two. I read in the paper about one of your peers from your younger years. She’s marrying the Rockmoore man. You remember him, don’t you? You ought to be thinking about marriage and your future. If you aren’t careful, the years will race by and you’ll die an old maid.” She smoothed one of her perfect curls. “You’re *always* so busy. I wonder sometimes if a respectable marriage is even important to you.”

“I’m sorry I’m late,” Penny said through gritted teeth. “I wonder sometimes if you have any idea why I do what I do. You do realize that I can’t marry the Rockmoore or Vanstofferson men even if they asked. I’m not part of that world any longer.” Penny closed the door behind her. “I work so we can survive. Then, after all that, I walk home, often in the dark.”

Florence patted her daughter's cheek. "You really shouldn't make that long walk alone."

Penny fought the urge to push her hand away. "I'd take Honey if I could, but there isn't anywhere for her to be all day. I'm already indebted to the Wilsons for letting her spend the days with their children."

"I wish you could take that dog. It's always underfoot."

"They bring her back in the evening. You only have to step over her for a half hour or so before I'm home."

"It seems longer than that." With contempt written across her face, Florence looked toward the sleeping Honeysuckle. "Enough about that dog. You should have a chaperone or companion when you are out walking. It's appalling the way you walk all over the city."

It was so like her mother to speak of their life now as though it was something Penny had handpicked for herself. "I walk alone because there is no one for me to walk with. I go so we can have this place to live and food to eat. I didn't ask for this life. I've only tried to adapt to what we've been given. I thought someday you'd accept it." She could hold the bitterness back no longer. Just looking at her mother with her coiffed hair and disgruntled frown was more than she could handle. "You sit around all day wishing we still had money. I miss those days too. Don't you think I'd rather be doing something else?" Her voice rose as the emotion and turmoil within her grew. "Father is dead. Our old life is gone and has been for years. You can't pretend you're still the belle of the ball by curling and pinning your hair."

"I don't—"

"That world shut us out. Even if they took us back, I don't know if I'd fit there. The truth is, I don't know where I fit. I feel

restless working every day, but . . . well, what difference does it make? The dead letter office is my future. This apartment is yours. This is our lives now. We're two forgettable people living our days out."

"You may have lost sight of who you are, but I *am* important," Florence said, standing tall. "I am the wife of Calvin Ercanbeck. And you are his daughter. You ought to act like it."

"You're right." Penny took a deep, calming breath, then forced her words to come slowly. "I am his daughter and that is why I get up and walk alone to the dead letter office every single day. He'd be proud of me for facing this hard lot. I wish you could be too."

Before her mother could utter another word, Penny stepped away and crossed the floor toward her dog.

"Honey!" Penny called to the dog she'd raised from a pup. "Come here, girl. Come say hello to me."

Honey leaned back on her long hind legs, stretched, and yawned. Penny sat down and stroked Honey's long, dark curly locks.

"You'll be covered in hair," Florence said.

Penny shook her head. Honey had lived in their house for six years and still her mother knew so little. "She doesn't shed much. If there's any hair on me, I'll brush it off later. Right now I'm going to tell Honeysuckle about my day." With her back to her mother, she grabbed the giant animal's big, floppy ears and scratched them. Honey put her head on Penny's shoulder and finally Penny felt as though she was being welcomed home. "It's so good to see you," she said in the sing-song voice she used so often with her furry friend. Honey licked her hand, then pushed her nose against it. "You want more love, don't you?"

"I've already eaten." Florence's voice interrupted Penny's

moment. “I’m going to go unpin my hair and get ready for bed.” Florence walked over to Penny and kissed her cheek. It wasn’t the warm, motherly kiss Penny craved. It was a stiff, customary gesture. “Good night, dear.”

“Good night, Mother,” Penny answered, then returned her attention to Honey. “I know you want to hear how I spent my day. Don’t you, girl?” Honey scooted closer. “Well, I read so many letters that I thought my head would explode. But I did have a favorite letter. It was from a man named Thomas to his true love.”

Penny picked up a wire brush and began running it over the dog’s long hair. The man Penny’s father had gotten Honey from vowed the puppy was a poodle, and there were some resemblances to a poodle, but Honey’s hair was longer than the average poodle’s and she was taller and broader.

“I wonder if I were to have a true love, would someone get a lost letter to me? Or would it be tossed out? I hate to think I’m playing a role in someone’s heartache.” Honey cocked her head at the sound of Penny’s voice, but aside from her friendly eyes, she offered no reply. Penny leaned her head back. “What if Thomas’s life is altered all because his letter came to me and not to Clara?”

The dog licked Penny’s hand, earning her a grin. “You understand, don’t you? You know that the letters matter. And you’re right—they *do* matter. Each one was mailed for a reason.” She kissed the beloved dog’s furry head. “I sometimes feel like you are the only one who understands me.” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “Mother thinks I’m foolish. She’s always telling me that I’ve forgotten myself. I wonder if she even realizes where we’d be living if I hadn’t gotten this job. Even Dinah thinks I take it all too seriously.”

Penny's throat felt tight as a dull melancholy crept over her. "Father would understand. If he were here, he'd talk to Mother the way he used to. He'd say the right thing and suddenly she'd understand me. Mother would smile and be happy again. If he were still here, he'd sit by me and listen to my troubles. He wouldn't think I was foolish for clinging to hopes of something more. There's so much I was never able to ask him." A tear crept down her cheek. "Do you think the world will ever feel right again?"

Penny buried her face in Honey's soft, thick fur. "I think if I didn't have you, I'd feel completely destitute. The monotony of this life alone would be more than I could bear."

Honey shifted her body, curling into Penny even more.

"Someday we'll find our place in the world. We will, won't we?"