

GHOST NOTES

Love never dies in Misty Bay

A Second Chance at Romance



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CHAPTER 1: THE FIRST RIBBON

Brena Matthews paused on the sidewalk outside her bookstore, keys dangling from fingers that trembled slightly in the crisp Maine air. The white flowers cascaded down the eastern wall of the building like stars fallen to earth, their sweet perfume defying the season's chill.

She'd owned Jasmine Books for three years now, and the climbing vines had never, not once bloomed past September.

She inserted the brass key into the lock and pushed open the heavy wooden door. The familiar scent of old books and jasmine blossoms enveloped her like a welcoming embrace, and for just a moment, she could almost imagine Noah was waiting inside with two cups of coffee and his crooked grin.

"Don't," she warned herself, using the same sharp internal voice that had kept her functional for the past four years. Don't do that to yourself.

The morning routine had become a sacred ritual: lights on throughout the store, classical music playing softly from the sound system Noah had installed during their first summer in Misty Bay, coffee brewing in the small kitchen tucked behind the mystery section.

She moved through these tasks with practiced efficiency, muscle memory guiding her while her mind remained carefully blank.

It wasn't until she reached the romance section—always her last stop before opening, that she saw it.

A book lay open on the reading table she'd placed beneath the front window, its pages catching the early morning light. *Forever in Your Arms* by Rebecca Hayes, one of the bestselling romance novels of the past decade. She'd sold dozens of copies, but this particular edition looked different. Older. More worn. As if it had been loved by many hands.

What made her breath catch, however, wasn't the book itself but what marked its pages: a length of purple ribbon, silk by the look of it, positioned carefully to hold the book open to a specific passage. The ribbon seemed to glow in the morning light, its color so vivid and familiar that her heart began to race before her mind could catch up.

Purple. Like her wedding bouquet. Like the ribbons they'd woven through her hair on the happiest day of her life.

With hands that shook more than they had any right to, Brena approached the table. She hadn't put this book here. She was certain of it. Every evening before closing, she made a careful circuit of the store, returning misplaced volumes to their proper shelves, straightening displays, and ensuring everything was in perfect order for the next day. She would have noticed a book left open on the reading table.

Wouldn't she?

The passage marked by the purple ribbon made her knees weak:

"I wouldn't change a single moment," Marcus whispered against Isabella's temple as they danced beneath the stars. "Not the joy, not the sorrow, not even the fear of losing you. Because all of it—every heartbeat, every breath, every tear—led us to this. Led us too forever."

"How can you be so certain?" Isabella asked, her voice barely audible above the music drifting from the ballroom.

"Because love finds a way," he said simply. "Real love, true love—it transcends everything. Time, distance, even death itself. It finds a way to keep protecting what matters most."

The words blurred as tears she hadn't shed in months filled her eyes. She'd read this book before, of course—had recommended it to countless customers who wanted "something beautiful and hopeful."

But she'd never noticed this particular passage; she had never felt its words reach through the page and wrap around her broken heart like a gentle embrace. Under the open book, tucked partially under the purple ribbon, lay a small piece of paper. Cream-colored, expensive, the kind of stationery her grandmother had used for her most important correspondence.

With trembling fingers, Brena lifted the ribbon and extracted the note.

The handwriting was elegant, unfamiliar, and written in deep blue ink:

Love finds a way, even across time. Don't be afraid to turn the page. Someone who loves you.

She sank into the reading chair beside the table, the note fluttering to her lap as emotions she'd kept carefully locked away for four years threatened to overwhelm her defenses.

The purple ribbon. The message about love transcending time. The impossible coincidence of finding them here, now, in the store that had become her sanctuary and her prison.

"This is not possible," she whispered to the empty store, her voice echoing off the shelves lined with thousands of other love stories. "This is not happening."

But even as she spoke the words, part of her—a part she'd tried so hard to silence—whispered back, "what if it is?"

The bell above the front door chimed, startling her back to the present. Brena quickly wiped her eyes and slipped both the note and the ribbon into her cardigan pocket, closing the book with hands that still trembled.

"Good morning, dear!" called Mrs. Henley.

"Just tired," Brena managed, forcing a smile as she stood and smoothed her hands down her jeans. "Coffee's not quite ready yet, but I can put the kettle on for tea if you'd like."

Mrs. Henley studied her with the sharp eyes that had spotted countless misfiled books during her forty-year library career. "Hmm. Well, I suppose we all have our difficult mornings. Speaking of which, have you met the gentleman who moved into the apartment upstairs?"

Brena blinked, certain she'd misheard. "I'm sorry?"

"The apartment above the store. Third floor. I saw lights up there last night when I was walking Duchess, and again this morning before dawn. Thought you might have rented it out at last."

The building that housed Jasmine Books was three stories tall, with Brena's living quarters occupying the second floor and the third floor remaining stubbornly vacant despite her best efforts to find a tenant.

She'd shown the space to dozens of potential renters over the past three years, but something always seemed to go wrong. Applications would disappear, references

wouldn't call back, or prospective tenants would simply change their minds without explanation.

"Mrs. Henley, I haven't rented the upstairs apartment to anyone. Are you certain you saw lights?"

The older woman's faded blue eyes grew concerned. "Oh, my dear, of course I'm certain. Duchess and I walk past here every evening at nine and every morning at six thirty. We've done so for fifteen years. I know this building like I know my own home." She paused, her expression growing thoughtful. "Though now that I think about it, the lights weren't electric. More like... candlelight? Or perhaps oil lamps? Very soft and warm."

A chill that had nothing to do with the October air ran down Brena's spine. She thought of the footsteps she'd been hearing, the sense of presence she'd been dismissing as imagination or wishful thinking.

"I should probably check with my landlord," she said carefully. "Perhaps there's been some confusion with the lease paperwork."

Mrs. Henley nodded approvingly. "That would be wise. Though I must say, if you have found a tenant at last, I hope he's a quiet one. The previous renter—what was his name? That young author fellow? —he was lovely. Very respectful. Paid his rent months in advance and never caused a moment's trouble."

"Previous renter?" Brena's voice came out sharper than she'd intended. "Mrs. Henley, there's never been a

previous renter. The apartment has been empty since I moved in."

The older woman's eyebrows were drawn together, confused. "But, dear, that can't be right. There was definitely someone living up there when you first opened the store. A young man, very handsome in a brooding sort of way. Dark hair, always carrying books. I used to see him coming and going at odd hours, always using the fire escape rather than the front entrance. Kept to himself, but he was polite enough when we happened to meet."

Brena stared at her, a dozen questions forming and dissolving on her tongue. Mrs. Henley was many things, opinionated, occasionally meddlesome, fiercely protective of the people she cared about—but she was not senile. Her mind remained sharp as a tack, her memory nearly photographic. If she said there had been a tenant, then there had been a tenant.

But how was that possible? Brena had reviewed every piece of paperwork when she'd signed her lease with Mr. Patterson, the building's owner. There had been no mention of an existing tenant, no record of rental income from the third floor, and no indication that anyone else had claim to any part of the building.

"Mrs. Henley," she said slowly, "when exactly did you last see this person?"

The older woman tapped her chin thoughtfully. "It's been several months now. Spring, perhaps? I remember thinking it was odd that he moved out so suddenly. One day he was there, the next day gone, as if he'd simply vanished into thin air."

Before Brena could respond, the front door chimed again, and three more customers entered in quick succession: Tom Walsh, who ran the hardware store down the street; Sarah Chen, a young mother who homeschooled her twin daughters and devoured historical fiction; and Rebecca Martinez.

"Morning, Brena!" Tom called cheerfully. "Sarah here was just telling me you might have some books on organic gardening. My wife's decided she wants to start composting, and Lord knows I need all the help I can get." As the familiar rhythm of customer service took over, Brena found herself grateful for the distraction. She helped Tom find numerous books on sustainable gardening, recommended a new biography to Sarah, and listened with genuine interest as Rebecca described her efforts to establish her practice in a town where therapy was still viewed with considerable suspicion.

But throughout the morning, she remained acutely aware of the purple ribbon and note tucked in her pocket, of Mrs. Henley's revelation about the mysterious former tenant, and of the impossible jasmine blooms nodding outside her windows. Every few minutes, her

gaze would drift upward, as if she might catch some sign of movement in the apartment above.

It wasn't until the lunch rush died down, and she found herself alone in the store, that she allowed herself to examine the note again. The handwriting was definitely masculine, confident but not aggressive, with a slight flourish to the capital letters that suggested someone comfortable expressing himself through written words.

Someone who loves you.

The phrase sent an unwelcome flutter through her chest. She'd convinced herself that a chapter of her life was over, that the kind of love she'd shared with Noah was a once-in-a-lifetime gift that couldn't—shouldn't—be repeated. She'd built her entire existence around that conviction, creating a safe, predictable world where love meant caring for her customers, for her store, and for the stray cats that gathered behind the building each evening.

Beyond that, she didn't have room in that world for purple ribbons and mysterious notes.

She didn't have room for the possibility that someone might be watching over her, caring about her happiness, hoping for her future.

She didn't have room for hope.

But as she stood there in her store, surrounded by thousands of love stories that promised second chances and happy endings, she found herself slipping the note back into her pocket rather than throwing it away. Found

herself wondering who might know about her love for the color purple, who might care enough to leave such a message.

Found herself, for the first time in four years, curious about tomorrow.

The afternoon passed quietly, with only a handful of customers and plenty of time for Brena to lose herself in the routine tasks that kept Jasmine Books running smoothly. She processed new inventory, updated her online catalog, and spent an hour rearranging the young adult section to make room for a shipment of new releases she expected next week.

But no matter how busy she kept herself, her thoughts kept drifting upward to the empty apartment, to Mrs. Henley's mysterious former tenant, to the impossible lights that had been seen burning in windows that should have been dark.

As closing time approached, she found herself standing at the base of the narrow staircase that led to the upper floors. She'd climbed these stairs thousands of times to reach her apartment on the second floor, but she'd only been to the third floor a handful of times—always with prospective tenants, always during daylight hours, always with a sense of unease she couldn't quite explain.

The staircase was well-maintained but narrow, with walls of exposed brick and a handrail worn smooth by decades of use. Her footsteps echoed hollowly as she

climbed past her own front door and continued upward, each step increasing the strange sense of anticipation that had been building in her chest all day.

The third-floor landing was small and plain, with only one door marked "3A" in brass numbers that needed polishing. Brena had a key to this door somewhere in her cluttered desk drawer—Mr. Patterson had given her copies of all the keys when she'd signed her lease, explaining that she might need access for emergency repairs or to show the space to potential tenants.

She pressed her ear to the door and listened carefully. Nothing. No sound of movement, no hint that anyone might be inside. Just the faint smell of.. coffee? And something else—something warm and masculine and oddly familiar.

Her hand moved toward the doorknob before she caught herself. She had no right to enter the apartment without permission, even if she did have a key. If someone was living there—legally or otherwise—barging in unannounced could constitute breaking and entering, regardless of whose name was on the lease.

But as she turned to go back downstairs, she could have sworn she heard something: the soft creak of floorboards, as if someone had just shifted their weight from one foot to the other.

The sound of someone waiting.

Back in the store, Brena tried to focus on her closing routine, but her mind kept returning to that sound, to the possibility that someone was living just above her head. Someone who apparently came and went using the fire escape, who kept odd hours and preferred candlelight to electricity, who had somehow escaped the notice of landlords and lease agreements.

As she locked the front door and turned off the lights, she found herself looking up at the third-floor windows. They were dark now, just as they'd been every night for the past three years. But something was different. A sense of... expectancy? As if the building itself was holding its breath.

She was halfway to the stairs that led to her apartment when she noticed it: another book, left open on the counter beside the cash register. This one was smaller than the morning's discovery, a slim volume of poetry she recognized as one of her personal favorites. *Love Songs for the Broken-Hearted* by Celeste Monroe.

And there, marking a specific page, was another purple ribbon.

This time, Brena didn't hesitate. She approached the counter with something approaching resignation, as if she'd been expecting this second discovery all along. The marked poem was one she knew by heart, one that had brought her comfort during the darkest months after Noah's death:

"Love is not something to be grasped or owned, but something to be celebrated and shared. It does not end when the beloved departs but transforms into something eternal and pure. True love wants nothing but the beloved's joy, even if that joy must come from another's arms."

The note tucked beneath this ribbon was written on the same cream-colored paper, in the same elegant hand:

Your heart is too beautiful to remain closed forever. Trust that some gifts are meant to be opened slowly. Someone who loves you.

Brena sank onto the stool behind the counter; both notes now spread before her like pieces of a puzzle she wasn't sure she wanted to solve. The rational part of her mind offered a dozen explanations: a customer with a romantic streak, a secret admirer among the townspeople, an elaborate prank by someone who knew about her tragic past.

But rational explanations couldn't account for the way these messages seemed to reach directly into her heart and touch places she'd thought were permanently numb. Rational explanations couldn't account for the purple ribbons that matched her wedding colors exactly, or the timing that felt too perfect to be coincidental. Nothing could explain the growing certainty that whoever was leaving these notes knew her in ways that went beyond casual observation.

She was still sitting there, staring at the notes, when her phone buzzed with a text message from her sister Emma in Portland: Haven't heard from you in weeks. Everything okay? Call me!

Brena typed back quickly: All fine. Just busy with the store. Will call this weekend.

She couldn't begin to explain to Emma—practical, no-nonsense Emma who'd spent the past four years gently but persistently encouraging her to "get back out there"—about purple ribbons and mysterious notes. Emma would want to know details, would insist on rational explanations, and would probably drive up from Portland to investigate personally.

And Brena wasn't ready for rational explanations. Not yet.

Instead, she carefully folded both notes and placed them in her jewelry box upstairs, tucking them into the small velvet compartment where she kept Noah's wedding ring and the pearl earrings he'd given her for their third anniversary. The purple ribbons she wound gently around her fingers before placing them in the same compartment, their silk softness a tangible reminder that whatever was happening was real.

As she prepared for bed, Brena found herself listening more carefully than usual to the sounds of the old building settling around her. Every creak of wood, every whisper of wind through the eaves, and every distant

sound from the street outside seemed charged with possibility.

For the first time since Noah's death, she fell asleep, wondering what tomorrow might bring.

And three floors above, in an apartment that was supposed to be empty, a figure stood at the window looking down at the jasmine-covered wall, at the soft glow of streetlights on Memory Lane, at the sleeping town that had become an unexpected sanctuary.

In his hand, he held a fountain pen and another cream-colored note, already written and ready for tomorrow's discovery. The handwriting was elegant, confident—the handwriting of someone who had spent years crafting words, choosing each one with care, understanding the power of language to heal or wound, to encourage or destroy.

Tonight, like every night for the past six months, he had chosen to heal.

Tomorrow, he would choose again.

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