



seeking sara summers

A NOVEL BY

SUSAN  
GABRIEL

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## CHAPTER ONE

Sara Stanton stopped at an intersection and stared at the red traffic light ahead of her. She wasn't the type to go off driving into the night. Not without a map and her destination circled in yellow highlighter. Her grin grew into a smile. She had managed to surprise herself. What if she just kept driving? The possibility intrigued her. She could be one of those people who went into the store to get a pack of cigarettes—in her case, a quart of Rocky Road—and never be seen or heard from again.

As her ten-year-old Volvo wagon vibrated its need for a tune-up, she adjusted the blue bandana that hid her new crop of short hair, the result of chemo. At home she wore bandanas but she wore a wig to school. Despite its similarity to her real hair she always felt that she was traveling in disguise. Doing some kind of undercover work investigating the criminally boring, of which she was a charter member.

Sara reached up and touched the vacant lot where her right breast used to be in a kind of pledge allegiance to the past. She had become a hybrid: part woman, part girl. Surgery had removed her right breast and the chemo had been tolerable. Besides the hair loss, it had produced only a mild, yet

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persistent, nausea over the weeks, accompanied by exhaustion. She was now in remission. But getting rid of the cancer in her body was the least of her worries.

She tapped the steering wheel with nails in need of another coat of polish and stared at the chip of a diamond in the engagement ring Grady had bought her twenty-five years before. He had offered to replace it on their 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary with something much bigger, much nicer. But she liked the simplicity of it and the time it represented. She could have worn Mimi's ring if she had wanted; her grandmother's 3-carat monstrosity. But she had saved it for her daughter, Jess. Or if Jess kept her adolescent promise to never succumb to marriage, she would give it to one of the boys for their wife-to-be.

The driver in the pick-up truck behind her beeped his horn. Sara threw the car into gear and accelerated through the small town she had lived in her entire life. She approached the street she and Grady had lived on for the last twenty years. She slowed, as she always did. She signaled to turn, as she always did. But then she didn't. She kept going. She drove out of town. She drove until the street lights ended and the road narrowed into a country road. Could a forty-four year old woman run away from home?

*What are you doing?* the voice began in her head. This was not a voice Sara liked very much. They rarely agreed on anything. *What about your responsibilities?* the voice continued. It was true. She had responsibilities. She had a husband, who right about now would be wondering about his ice cream that she had gone to the store to get. She also had six classes of high school English students, who relied on her to torment them with term papers and pop quizzes; a gaggle of drama students; numerous committees she served on, albeit unwillingly; various friends, none of whom she felt particularly close to; and the children, who were technically grown and out of the house. Not to mention, Doctor Evans, the marriage and family therapist Grady and Sara went to every Friday afternoon at 4:00, who relied on their weekly visits to help put his children through college.

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Sara turned off her cell phone, anticipating Grady's call. Would he be more concerned about her or the fate of his Rocky Road? Their marriage had hit a rocky road itself two years before. It was a classic case of infidelity: long-term marriage, someone in his office, she offered, he acquiesced. The oldest story in the book. Sara was hurt at the time. But not nearly to the extent she would have expected. After that Grady had stopped working late. He spent more time at home.

And then she got cancer. By Grady's reaction, the "in sickness and health" part of their 25 year marriage had not included cancer. Sara had spent the last year apologizing for getting sick, apologizing for adding stress to his already stressful day.

In the last year Sara had taken stock of herself, as someone who takes stock of emergency supplies before a hurricane. Cancer was a shipwreck, she had decided, leaving survivors adrift at sea without drinking water, maps or oars. Every waking hour was spent in hope of rescue. Unfortunately, she had also discovered that she was ill-prepared for anything catastrophic—and was basically a coward. Not only about dying, but also about living. What did people do when they were absolutely sick of their lives?

Sara was driving too fast for the deserted country road but she didn't care. The head lights illuminated a dense layer of fog. Trees lined the road, creating a double layer of silvery darkness. Sara's giddiness took on a dark quality. She fantasized briefly about purposely losing control of the car and crashing into the trees. Death would probably be instantaneous. A sacrificial return to nature because she had failed at the one life given her. Well, maybe not failed, she thought, I just haven't shown up yet. Sara winced. When had she become so disappointed in herself?

Her death would go widely unnoticed. A small article in the local newspaper would relay the details of an ordinary life: the mother of three, teacher at the local high school, Girl Scout troop leader. . . *Blah, blah, blah*, went the voice in her

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head. Was that what a life came down to? A paragraph in the local paper?

What happened those days when she never gave life a thought? Her angst hidden beneath a flurry of endless activity. All three children had played soccer, resulting in countless hours spent on cold, hard school bleachers cheering them on. Not to mention a decade of school band concerts, music lessons and annual fund-raisers for their various activities that resulted in boxes of rotting citrus in their garage almost every Christmas. To this day, the sight of oranges and grapefruit made Sara slightly nauseous. Those years were a blur. A blur that now seemed blissfully void of self-examination.

Life had to be more than the day-to-day maintenance of a husband, kids and a community, she thought. Sure there were moments of joy but most were quickly erased by the drudgery and hard work of life. Had there ever been any passion? Was her life ever really fun? Ever anything other than routine?

She accelerated again and rocked the steering wheel, swerving closer and closer to the trees on the edge of the road. She played at death the same way she played at life: afraid to commit. The tires suddenly grabbed at the shoulder. Dirt and gravel spewed from behind. Sara braked. She lost control of the car and desperately jerked it back onto the road. She missed one tree by inches. The second tree claimed the side mirror and scraped the side of the door. The car stopped. Adrenalin coursed through her body, accelerating her heartbeat and sending fireworks of hot tingles to her face.

Ice cream melted on the front seat. She took a deep breath; then another. A slight breeze dissipated the fog. The night became clearer. You've got to be kidding me, Sara thought. She laughed a brief, haunting laugh. The car had settled about a hundred feet away from a crossroads. Was the universe shoving the obvious in her face?

In the middle of the dark, deserted, New England countryside, she had suddenly found herself within the pages of a self-help book. She was at a crossroads in her life. Something had to change. She needed to go in a totally

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different direction. If she didn't, she feared for what would happen. The result felt as life-threatening as cancer.

Leaves clung to the wiper blades. It was fall in New England, the most beautiful time of the year, and she had hardly noticed. She chewed thoughtfully on a thumb nail. It would have been easier to crash into the trees. She didn't know how to start a new life. Especially if it involved giving up the old one.

Sara got out of the car and retrieved a flashlight from the trunk. The side mirror lay crushed at the base of a tree. She aimed the light toward the car. A deep silver scrape extended from where the side mirror used to be to the tail light. She wondered how Grady would react. She had never even had a fender-bender in twenty-five years of marriage.

A set of headlights appeared in the distance. Sara got back in the car and revved the engine. She made a three-quarter turn driving slowly back toward town, tailpipe between her legs. Tears blurred the dark countryside. So much for running away, she thought. Like her youngest son, Sam, who at four years of age ran away from home and ended up in the tree house in the backyard, she had only gotten ten miles out of town.

The next morning students poured into her homeroom to beat the tardy bell. Sara's friend, Maggie, whose classroom was at the end of the hall, maneuvered her way across the room like a woman shopping the bargain basement intent on securing the best buys. Maggie's red hair, compliments of Clairol, set her apart from the crowd. She always wore green on some part of her body, as though every day was St. Patrick's Day and she might be pinched if found lacking.

"You look awful," she said.

"Gee, thanks," Sara said, her sarcasm giving her an odd satisfaction. "I didn't get much sleep," she added. Sara secured a loose strand of hair from her wig behind her ear; the same strand that always broke away from the rest. Was this intentional? she wondered. To make the wig seem more realistic?

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“What happened to your car?” Maggie asked. “I saw it in the parking lot.”

“I side-swiped a tree. Don’t worry, the tree is fine.”

“And Grady didn’t kill you?”

“I haven’t exactly told him yet.” Sara raised her voice over the growing chaos in the room. She didn’t mention the crossroads she had approached the night before. Or her disappointment in herself that she wasn’t somewhere in Nova Scotia by now.

Sara turned an irritated gaze to her students, who could still be intimidated in their first year of high school. The volume of chatter decreased.

Maggie leaned against the edge of Sara’s desk. “What’s going on, Sara? Is the cancer back?”

“No, no,” she said. “Nothing like that. I was just looking for nail file to break out of this joint.” When was it, she wondered, that she started hating her job?

The tardy bell rang. Maggie apologized. “I’ve got to go before my little angels start a Civil War.” Maggie taught American History. She squeezed Sara’s arm. “Don’t worry, honey. You’ll get through this.”

Would she?

The door closed, leaving Sara as the only adult in a room full of twenty-four teenagers. *Never let them see your fear*, a mentor teacher had told Sara her first year of teaching. She squared her shoulders, retrieved her red pen from her satchel and opened the classroom roll book. For a few seconds she studied the captives in front of her. Was she ever like them?

A mixture of bravado and insecurity seeped out of their attitudes, speech, and their very pores, accentuated by piercings, tattoos, and fake hair colors to hide their middle-class roots. Following homeroom, several of these same captives would stay for her honors Freshman English class.

Sara raised her voice, “Settle down!” The roar of laughter and conversation subsided as if they instantly understood that today was not a day to challenge her. She enjoyed the power she had at first. But by the end of the first semester they had usually started to see through her.



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Sara glanced out the windows that lined the entire wall. It was one of those schools built in the 50s that still had large, panel windows framed in dark wood, making the room freezing in winter and boiling in summer.

Ironically, as a teenager Sara had sat in this same classroom, a student of Mrs. McGregor's English literature class. She and her best friend Julia always sat together in the back of the room next to the windows. Day after day, they secretly made fun of Mrs. McGregor, a woman they considered older than Methuselah. When bored, they entertained themselves by keeping tally of Mrs. McGregor's wrinkles, making comic faces when they hit double digits. One day Sara's laughter had accidentally escaped into the room. A loud, honking footnote to Mrs. McGregor's lecture on *Beowulf*. Everyone turned to look at her as she ducked her chin to her chest and wished to disappear. Her face still turned hot just thinking about it all these years later.

Whatever happened to Julia? she wondered.

"Mrs. Stanton?"

Molly Decker slouched toward her, dressed entirely in black. Her black lipstick was in sharp contrast to the ivory makeup that covered a crop of pimples on her chin. *Would she find out some day that she wanted to run away from her life?*

"Yes?" Sara answered.

"Do we have drama after school today?"

"No, not today. I have to cancel," she said. Sara never cancelled anything. Not even in the throes of chemo. But the combination of really bad Shakespeare and her current angst seemed too much drama to bear today.

Insomnia robbed Sara of another night's sleep, as if a nightclub sign flashed the words *GET A LIFE* outside her window. She slipped from under the covers and stepped over Luke, their youngest son Sam's golden retriever—abandoned when Sam went away to college, never to be retrieved.

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Moonlight came through the blinds and helped her find her way to her office downstairs, a home improvement project that had distracted them for months. An endless stack of papers to grade filled the extra chair in the room, a faded wingback beauty that Sara had found at a garage sale a decade before.

Bookshelves covered an entire wall where aging classics fought for space among the stacks of self-help books. She was always buying books that she never had time to read.

Sara searched the bottom desk drawer for a framed photograph of Julia and Sara as girls. After she found it she ran a finger along the glass to remove a layer dust. Sara stared into the past. At the time of the photo Julia's family was getting ready to move to England. Julia's eyes sparkled anticipating a new adventure, her arm around Sara's waist. Julia wore a pair of blue-jean overalls and red high-top sneakers. Julia had said once she wanted to be buried in that outfit, she loved it so much. And Sara had loved her.

Over the years Sara had wondered about Julia. But losing touch with people had become as habitual as losing touch with herself. She turned on the computer. Could she track Julia down on the internet? She had no idea if her childhood friend had married and used a different name. But what could it hurt? She typed *Julia David* into the search engine and waited for the response. How easy it was to check on people these days, she thought. She had typed in her own name on more than one occasion but there was nothing. Sara Stanton from Northampton, Mass didn't exist, as far as the world wide web could surmise.

Several references came up for Julia David. A few press releases about promotions, an article in an alumni magazine. Sara clicked on each reference. Evidently Julia had been an attorney in England for several years, specializing in high profile corporate cases. But the latest entries were of an artist in Florence. Was that Julia, too?

Sara smiled. She liked thinking of Julia in Italy. As a girl, Sara would have given anything to go to Italy. She had even written to the Italian Tourist Bureau and requested pamphlets,

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maps, anything Italian. Instead of teen posters of the heart throbs of the day, Sara had a map of Italy on her wall and a poster of the Duomo in Florence.

Sara continued her research, finally finding an email address for the Julia David in Florence. She started a new email and paused. What do you say to someone you haven't seen or talked to in almost thirty years?

*Dear Julia,*

*Do you remember me? If you are the right Julia David, we used to be best friends nearly 30 years ago. We went to Beacon High School together.*

*If you have any desire to be in touch, please email back.*

*Your friend,*

*Sara (Summers) Stanton*

It's worth a try, Sara thought, and sent the email. She returned upstairs and turned on the light in the bathroom. She squinted into the mirror and tried not to notice how much she resembled her mother who had died of breast cancer when Sara was twelve.

Her mother's illness was kept hidden from Sara and her older brother until close to the end. Then one day they came home from school and their dad was waiting for them. Their mom was in the hospital. Doctors were running tests, he had said. Before Sara had time to see her again she had died. Would her mother have run away from home if she had had the chance?

Sara ran a finger along the slight crook in her nose that she had contemplated with disgust during her entire adolescence. At least I inherited Mom's high cheekbones, she thought, which served to redeem the nose. The hair growing in was dark blonde with streaks of gray. She had gone from a blond soccer mom hairstyle to a middle-aged punk rocker in a matter of months.

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She pulled down her gown and studied the area where her right breast used to be. She had looked at it hundreds of times to get used to this new version of herself.

Mammary glands. That's all they are, she thought. But why did everyone worship them? Two breasts were a commodity. One breast made a woman automatically less of a person.

Sara turned off the light and walked down the dimmed hallway. At times, she felt like a character in a Charlotte Bronte novel, roaming the dark corridors at night. In the half-light she passed photographs of their children at different ages lining the walls. Jessica in her ballerina outfit—lessons lasted about as long as it took to take the photograph—John and Sam in soccer uniforms, Sam in his bigger brother's shadow, always looking up to him for approval. Not to mention every school photograph ever taken, complete with missing teeth and dated haircuts. Around the edges were a dozen photographs of Grady's family, most of them given to them by his mother, in contrast to only two of Sara's extended family. One of her father and Barb, his second wife, on their 10<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary in a tacky teal frame with woodcut dolphins in the corners. And a black and white photograph of her mother posing in front of the diner their family owned in downtown Northampton, after it first opened. She wore a huge smile, held a cigarette in her left hand, and looked like a young Meryl Streep.

It had occurred to Sara to tell her dad and brother about her cancer but she didn't want to open old wounds. Ten years before her dad had sold the diner and had retired to Miami with Barb, a woman with as little interest in getting to know Sara as Sara had in getting to know her.

Barb was always giving them gifts of dolphin figurines. Dolphins jumping in mid-air while anchored to ceramic bases; dolphins in groups of three, jumping in tandem above waterless oceans; dolphins painted in the base of ashtrays given to a family where no one smoked. These figurines were stored in the back of the pantry and only brought out for their infrequent visits.

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Five years older than Sara, her brother, Steve, owned a seafood restaurant in Ogunquit, Maine, with Amy, his high school sweetheart, whom he had never officially married. He rarely got away from his restaurant and Sara rarely got over to Maine. Neither of them ever thought to call or write, so years would go by without any contact other than a card at Christmas. Despite bloodlines Sara and her brother were practically strangers. She doubted he would recognize her if they passed each other on the street. Especially now.

Sara stepped over Luke who always slept on the Oriental rug on her side of the bed. His tail thumped softly against the hardwood floor. She sat on the edge of the bed. In the darkness Sara placed a hand over where her breast used to be. Her next appointment was with a plastic surgeon to talk about reconstructive surgery. But what I need reconstructing more than my breast is my life, she thought. Who could help her with that? Most importantly, could you reconstruct a life that had never been there in the first place?



## CHAPTER TWO

Morning light filtered through the window creating tree-shaped shadows on the tile floor. House plants cluttered the seat of the bay window, some gangly and overgrown in their pots, and competed for the limited space with haphazard stacks of home improvement magazines.

Clutter gave birth to yet more clutter, spilling over from room to room, creating a constant need to organize the chaos—stacks of mail, papers, books, clothes—evidence of a consumer-driven culture gone awry. Beyond the bay window was Sara’s attempt at a flower garden, an extension of the chaos inside.

Projects around their two-story, 1920s brick house had kept their marriage alive long beyond its natural shelf life. Grady and Sara had discovered that their marriage worked best when they were building something, whether it was a comfortable life, a future for their children, or an addition to their home. Intimate, detailed home improvement projects gave them a diversion from intimacy with one another.

“I want to organize the garage this weekend,” Grady said. “But I’ll need some shelves.”

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Sara poured them both a cup of coffee and joined him at the table in front of the bay window. “Why don’t we go to Home Depot after we finish our coffee?” she said, surprised by her enthusiasm. For years she had wished for at least one unplanned Saturday where she could experience the contemplative solitude she had read about in books. Now the thought of having time to evaluate her life seemed cruel punishment.

Grady used the back of an envelope to make a list of the things he would need. As long as he has the right tool for the job his life is complete, Sara thought. He had no desire to question his manner of existence. No need for regrets. At that moment she envied his simplicity.

She looked at her engagement ring, remembering when they were first married. They had struggled financially for years and agonized about whether or not to buy their house. But they had been happy back then, hadn’t they?

Sara and Grady arrived at the home improvement store early and roamed the aisles with the oversized shopping cart. Sara pushed the cart, rushing to keep up with Grady’s pace as they moved quickly through this vast world of fixtures, tools and lumber.

“Grady, is there a reason we’re going so fast?”

“I want to beat the crowds,” he said.

“Crowds?” Sara asked. “The store is deserted.”

Grady ignored her comment.

Sparrows chirped and flew among the rafters as if resigned to their captivity. Yet the large sliding doors opened frequently, giving them glimpses of freedom. Why didn’t they make a break for it? Sara wondered. Was freedom that scary? She thought of her own need to escape. No, it wasn’t that easy. Beyond those doors was something foreign and unknown. She felt compassion for the sparrows but little for herself.

His task completed, Grady approached his favorite cashier, a short, apple-shaped woman who looked like she existed on even less sleep than Sara did.

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“There they are,” she said to the younger woman next to her. “I was telling Jody you hadn’t been in yet. But here you are, regular as clockwork. Every Saturday morning.” The cashier in the next aisle smiled over at them. Her name, in bold letters, revealed the word “Trainee” underneath.

Grady’s charm with other women always surprised her. Sara studied him for a moment, imagining what the cashier saw when she looked at her husband. Grady had aged well. His graying hair accented his blue/gray eyes and the five miles he ran religiously every morning kept him physically fit. She would never have guessed from knowing him as a gangly, awkward boy that he would mature into such a handsome man.

“How are you, Ginny?” Grady asked the cashier.

“They have me working a double shift,” she said. “But I need the extra money.” She scanned and bagged their purchases with the adept swiftness that came from making the same motions for years.

“Hi, Mrs. Stanton. How are you?” she asked, as if she had caught herself ignoring her.

“I’m fine,” Sara said. “Sorry to hear about the double shift,” she added. But her words had little impact.

“Well, I hope they’re paying you double,” Grady said.

Ginny’s middle-aged face registered a glimmer of joy. “I wish,” she said. She looked over at Sara and smiled wistfully, as if to cement her belief that all the good men were taken.

Sara took Grady’s arm to solidify their image, a perfect commercial for marital bliss. It occurred to her that these were the times when they were closest, when they pretended to be someone else. No one suspected there might be something wrong with the picture they presented, not even Grady. No one questioned the fact that they were on their eighth home improvement project in two years, more home improvements per capita than anyone on their block. Even Ernie and David, the gay couple down the street, couldn’t keep up with them. They came over periodically to see what



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Grady and Sara were working on and looked on in home-improvement admiration.

After their youngest child, Sam had left home—preceded by their daughter, Jessica, and oldest son, John—Grady and Sara had spent months adding on a sun porch to the back of the house. The sun porch addition had actually marked the darkest time of their marriage. Their nest now empty, they had been left without the material that had been holding them together for over two decades. But with the help of treated lumber and galvanized nails, they gave CPR to a relationship that had gone too long without oxygen. Meanwhile, Sara became better at convincing herself that nothing was wrong.

Then she got cancer. Cancer had forced her to take another look at her life. Like Ebenezer Scrooge, she had been given a glimpse of an empty future, where she lived a miserly rendition of what life could be. Yet it was the life the cashier at Home Depot dreamed about: a good job, a good husband, a house in a good neighborhood.

*You're being unreasonable*, the familiar voice began in her head.

*Oh, shut up*, Sara thought.

*Why can't you be satisfied with what you have?* the voice continued. *Grady is a good man. Don't you see what you have? Don't you realize how many other women would be perfectly content with a life like yours?*

Grady loaded his purchases into the back of his SUV while Sara slid into the passenger side. She stared at the gas gauge on the console as they drove home. How was it that Grady's gas tank was always full? This required a diligence she couldn't imagine. She was always running on empty. Lately her life had begun to mirror this condition. Her so-called life had broken down and left her stranded on the side of the road without the resources she needed to carry on. A crossroads, indeed, she thought.

Grady hummed along with a Bruce Springsteen song relegated to the oldies station. Did he remember she was there? In her imagination she saw herself jumping out of the moving car. Crushed under the axle of her expectations. Sara

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gripped the safety belt across her chest to avoid the temptation.

*You're getting dramatic in your old age,* the voice clucked.

Sara sighed. *Perhaps a little drama is exactly what I need,* she thought.

Grady turned down the radio. "Are you okay?"

*No Grady, I'm not okay. I'm having a conversation with a voice in my head. I'm actually the farthest away from 'okay' I've ever been in my life. Why can't you see that?*

"I'm fine," Sara said.

He turned the radio back up, and hummed the last refrain of *Born to Run*.

They drove through the neighborhood that had changed very little during the twenty years they had lived here. It was a neighborhood adjacent to the one Sara had grown up in. She thought of Julia again, her girlhood friend. She hadn't thought of her in years and now twice in the last twenty-four hours. Wasn't Julia's parent's house three blocks over?

"Grady, can we go down Houser Street?"

He glanced at her, then shrugged and took the next block.

Julia had always collected strays—kittens, puppies, and birds—anything the least bit wounded. Sara was part of her flock, as was Grady.

Sara and Grady had grown up two streets west, in houses with the same floor plan, every other one transposed to make them appear different. Julia's house had been in an adjacent neighborhood marked by more trees and bigger houses, where no two looked alike.

The three of them had been best friends from fourth grade until their junior year in high school when Julia's family moved away. *The Three Musketeers* they had called themselves, as lame as it was. And then there were only two of them; Sara and Grady left behind like a two-legged stool. Why was she suddenly thinking so much about the past?

They married three years after Julia left. Sara had just turned twenty. It had been a small ceremony. Her father

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walked her down the aisle and sat next to his new wife, a woman very different from Sara's mother.

They drove in front of Julia's old house but Grady kept his eyes forward. Was he still mad at her for leaving? All these years later?

The small rose bushes Julia's mother had planted with Sara and Julia's help one hot August day were taller than Sara now. The oak tree they had climbed as children now had branches too tall to climb. And the red front door Julia had convinced her parents would look sophisticated, had been repainted by subsequent owners a smoky gray.

Julia always wore red—red shoes, red sweaters, red dresses—as if she owned a patent on the color. Red was not a color Sara considered wearing, even now. She preferred earth tones; colors that blended into the scenery. Red's vitality and passion was a moving target for the eyes of the world. Sara preferred safety over passion.

They turned onto their street. Ernie and David stood in their driveway unloading 2 x 4s from their white Land Rover. Grady beeped his horn and waved, then pulled in. "I'm just going to see what they're up to," he said to her. "Are you coming?"

"Not right now." Sara waved at the two middle-aged men who always looked like they had just stepped out of a Lands' End catalogue. They had been together as long as she and Grady.

Like boys in a locker room, the three men surveyed the length and width of the lumber. Grady laughed at something David said and put a leg up on the back of the Land Rover as if ready to stay for a while.

Sara's head ached a deep, nagging reminder of how disappointed she was with her life. She closed her eyes and rubbed her throbbing temples. Like a prospector panning for gold, she swirled the past, searching for any hints of an authentic life. Her thoughts returned to Julia. Memories of her old friend became a trail of bread crumbs that she might follow to find her way out of the forest.



### CHAPTER THREE

Grady stood over her in the flower garden, his body blocking the sun from Sara's face. "What's with you these days?" he asked. "You seem totally self-absorbed."

She rested her head on her knees. Until a year ago, when Sara discovered the lump, she had lived her life as though it had no expiration date. Those days were over. Sara hadn't told Grady about the twinge she had had the day before. Besides feeling physically odd, there was something else; an inner knowing that she hadn't put words to yet.

"I guess I am self-absorbed," she said. The sun warmed the crispness in the air. It was one of the last warm days of fall. The coming of winter always brought a slight melancholy for her. Winter seemed too perfect a metaphor for her marriage. She yearned to find a tiny bud of new life.

Sara had spent the morning pulling handfuls of weeds with a kind of reckless desperation, as if to rid herself of the regrets in her life.

Nearby, a small cluster of red flowers held onto the last days of bloom. The color red reminded her of Julia and of the email she had sent weeks before. She hadn't received a response.

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An impatient look rested on Grady's face. "You think too much," he pronounced. He studied Sara as if she were a case file. Someone he had initially insured but lately had proven too risky a candidate.

"You're probably right," Sara said. "Oh, I almost forgot, your mother called while you were in the shower," Sara said. She wasn't in the mood for Grady's analysis.

He tucked his gray T-shirt into his jeans, the words *Stanton Insurance* faded on the front. His mother called him at least once a day to report on her miscellaneous aches and pains. Maybe that's why he never seems to have room for mine, Sara thought.

Grady had taken over Stanton Insurance after his father retired. His office, located in downtown Northampton, was within ten minutes of their house. He often walked or rode his bicycle to work.

"Well I guess I'd better call her." Grady walked into the house. To the extent that Sara had an absent mother, Grady had a present one.

Later that night, Sara took Luke for a final walk of the day and came in the kitchen door. The door always stuck and required a hard push, using both hands and a knee to latch it. Sara and Grady had spent hundreds of hours on home improvements yet seemed to leave the little things unfixed.

Sara put Luke's leash on the hook in the pantry and refilled his water bowl. When she went into the bedroom Grady had showered and shaved. Sara sighed. Was she in the mood to make love?

She undressed and put on her nightgown. Then she sat on the bed and rubbed lotion onto her arms and legs, part of her nightly ritual. Grady ran a hand across her short hair—a gesture that reminded her of how he petted Luke—and climbed onto the bed behind her. He kissed Sara's neck. This was the moment she usually stopped him if she wasn't in the mood. But they hadn't made love since her last round of chemo, and she had missed being held.

*Susan Gabriel*

Grady lowered her nightgown. He kissed her shoulders and rubbed them with the lotion sitting beside her on the bed. He never looked at where her breast used to be, nor would he touch the place where the cancer had lived. He focused on the perky, good breast; the breast that was left. She wanted him to acknowledge what had happened to her. Was this why Sara had hesitated about getting reconstructive surgery?

“You feel tense,” Grady said. He deepened the pressure with his hands. “Do you want me to stop?” he asked, not stopping.

“No,” she said. Grady could be tender when he wanted something. Sara closed her eyes, knowing the path his hands would travel and the sounds they both would make.

They rolled over in bed and briefly kissed; a fleeting flirtation between tongues. Sara always wished the kissing lasted longer. She longed for a deep, passionate exchange of fluids, instead of the brief mingling of their minty fresh toothpaste.

Grady entered her, his movements accelerating, as if it was his job to pump up their passion. Sara’s mind wandered. She was suddenly reminded of Julia’s father cranking the arm of their old-fashioned ice cream maker. Professor David had made peach ice cream every summer on the patio in their backyard. Julia and Sara would eat so much of it they would get ice cream headaches and collapse into their hammock together.

Julia’s dad had taught European History at Smith College. He looked like a professor and always had a beard, even in the summer. Julia’s mother had been her dad’s teaching assistant and was twelve years younger. She was beautiful, as Julia was beautiful. Flawless skin highlighted by auburn hair that looked perpetually shiny, framing perfectly proportionate features.

“Why are you smiling?” Grady asked, his movement uninterrupted.

Should she tell him that she suddenly had an urge for peach ice cream? She reeled in her smile. “I was just enjoying you,” Sara said.

## *Seeking Sara Summers*

Grady smiled. A drop of sweat rained down on where her right breast used to be. Perhaps I can grow a new one from scratch, Sara thought.

Grady's breathing deepened as their ritual advanced. Sara imagined Julia in Florence. Was she married? Did she have children? Perhaps not. She had kept her maiden name.

"Grady, can you go deeper?" Sara said softly, surprising herself with this request.

Grady lifted up and decelerated, like a car shifting down a gear. "What?" he asked. His face was red. Sweat had gathered around his temples.

"Can you go deeper?" Sara whispered. She wanted deeper contact, deeper penetration. She wanted him to touch the part of her that was lonely and scared.

Grady groaned with enthusiasm and began again, putting more effort into his motions. It reminded her of the first time they had made love, a month after Julia had moved away. They had rocked the back of his red Chevy, as if the friction of their bodies might somehow be the magic to conjure Julia up again. Over the years they had graduated from cars, to dorm rooms, to their marital bed, which now creaked loudly with every thrust. Since the children had left there was a certain enjoyment to being louder than they used to be. Loudness, Sara supposed, that could be misinterpreted for passion.

Seconds later, the creaking bed stopped. Grady rolled to his side of the bed with a smile on his face and turned toward her. "That was amazing," he panted. "How was it for you?"

"Wonderful," she said, as she always did when he asked this question.

Grady kissed her lightly on the lips, and then rolled over to his side of the bed. Minutes later, he began to snore lightly. Hot tears filled Sara's eyes.

"I had hoped for better results," Doctor Morgan said. The head of the oncology department, he sat behind his large mahogany desk, more of a fortress than a piece of office furniture.

*Susan Gabriel*

Absentmindedly, Sara stuck a finger into the pot of a plant on the edge of the desk to see if it needed water. She was always sticking her fingers into pots at home, afraid that she would find the evidence of her neglect. But in this instance she discovered that the plant wasn't real. Was the man in charge of her treatment someone who couldn't even keep a plant alive?

A framed photograph of a smiling boy in a blue baseball uniform sat next to the plant. She wondered briefly, given the status of the plant, if the picture had come with the frame.

Doctor Morgan removed his glasses to reveal brown eyes that matched the crescent moon of hair hugging the back of his head. "I recommend we repeat the series and up the dosage this time."

Sara smoothed her skirt and rested her hand on her right leg that had begun to shake. She took a deep breath. "What should I do in the meantime?" She sounded surprisingly calm at hearing she would not be retiring her bandanas anytime soon.

"What you're already doing," he said. "Eat right, exercise." He paused and walked from behind his desk to sit in the chair next to her. Sara automatically leaned back. It felt strange to have him so close. He patted her hand three times and then added a fourth, as if to fulfill the prescriptive measure. Had he learned this gesture in medical school during a crash course on bedside manner? Several awkward moments passed before he put on his glasses again and returned to his desk. She glanced at the fake plant which looked as robust as ever, a prop in the play that was her life.

Sara left his office and walked down a long white hallway and waited for the elevator. Once inside, she pushed *L* for *Lobby* and thought: *Life. Life Lost. Loser*. The cancer was back.

The doors opened in the expansive white lobby subsidized by cancer. It was filled with floor to ceiling windows, an assortment of larger fake plants, and a waiting area full of people flipping nervously through magazines. Life is so



## *Seeking Sara Summers*

tenuous, she thought, and we fool ourselves into thinking it isn't.

Her footsteps echoed in the parking garage, strangely deserted in the middle of the day. Sara called the school to tell them she wouldn't be back that afternoon and went home to an empty house, except for Luke, who was ecstatic to see her.

Sara grabbed his leash in the pantry and hooked him up for a walk. Walking helped her process things. It helped her think. Luke led the way around a large block in their neighborhood lined with older homes. He sniffed and revisited his habitual places, a favorite bush, the elm tree at the corner, and a concrete lion on a driveway at the end of the road.

Her appointment with Doctor Morgan played over in her mind. He had not said the words but the implication was there: to get her affairs in order. But what affairs? Except for her grandmother's ring, she didn't really own anything apart from Grady. He would take care of everything. If anything, they were over-insured, over-prepared for external disasters. It seemed the things Sara needed to get in order were internal things. But how do you make peace and assign meaning to a life that was spent merely sleepwalking?

*You're being too hard on yourself,* the voice said.

Well that's a switch, Sara thought. If the critical voice in my head is defending me, I must really be in trouble.

Back at the house, Iris Whitworth, an elderly neighbor, watched Sara from her dining room window. The old woman seldom bothered to hide her interest. Sara waved and the curtain closed.

"What will she do if she doesn't have me around to watch?" Sara said to Luke. She pulled her jacket closer. The weather was changing. Clouds covered the sun.

Sara went inside and filled a tall glass with tap water and drank it completely, hoping its basic elements would ground her. Out the kitchen window, snow with large, moisture-laden flakes filled the sky. Winter had arrived.

*Susan Gabriel*

Minutes later the kitchen door slammed. Sara jumped as Grady walked into the kitchen.

“Didn’t mean to scare you,” he said.

“I was just deep in thought.” Sara could count on Grady not to pursue what she had been thinking.

He placed his canvas briefcase on a kitchen chair and removed the bands from the legs of his pants that he wore when he rode his bicycle home. Flakes of snow melted at his feet. He sifted through the stack of mail on the table and asked about her day, not even looking up.

“It was uneventful, really.” She lied. She would not tell Grady what the doctor had said, at least not yet.

For the first time Sara noticed that she and Grady were dressed alike. He wore a white shirt with his khaki pants. She wore a white sweater with her khaki skirt. Their pale faces emerged from an unintentional forest of yuppie camouflage.

Grady loosened his green tie dotted with small red peppers, a Christmas gift from their daughter, Jessica. Grady often received ties as gifts. His growing collection had taken over their closet. Despite the horizontal strip of color dividing his chest, he always looked the same.

Birds visited the feeder outside the kitchen window. Sara made dinner, numb to her surroundings. During their usual silence at the dinner table Sara’s finite life felt unending. News reports blared on the small television that sat on a nearby counter. Voices on the television took the place of their own. Far away disasters distracted them from the quiet one right there in the room.

She thought of the sparrows in the rafters of the home improvement store and pushed the winter squash from one edge of her plate to the other. “You know, I’ve never liked squash,” she said, to break the silence.

Grady looked up. He chewed thoughtfully and then swallowed. “Then why do you fix it so often?” he asked.

“I’m not sure,” she said. “I guess because you like it.”

“I don’t like it either,” he said.

They grinned at each other, as if they had caught themselves in the lie they had been living.

## *Seeking Sara Summers*

After dinner, Sara retreated to her office to grade term papers. With felt-tip pen in hand, she began with the paper on top; Molly Decker's dark critique on the book *Little Women*, where she insisted that hidden within the pages of the classic was Jo March's Goth agenda.

Was I ever this intense? Sara wondered. Perhaps her life would have gone better if she had been.

Two hours later, she had only finished eight of the twenty-four she had to grade. She rubbed her eyes and turned on the computer. She checked her email. A new message from a *J. David* appeared in her Inbox.

Sara gasped. "Julia?" she asked, as if the email might answer her.

*Dear Sara,*

*What a wonderful surprise! Of course I remember you!! How could I forget? We were practically joined at the hip when we were growing up.*

*HOW ARE YOU??*

*Sorry I haven't answered sooner. I have an art show coming up and I've just been swamped with getting pieces ready. But it is so great hearing from you after all these years.*

*What have you been up to?*

*Did you do all that traveling you wanted to do when you were a girl?*

*TELL ME EVERYTHING!*

*On a different note, I sent you something in the mail last week. You should get it soon if you haven't received it already.*

*Your friend,  
Julia*

*P.S. So can I assume from the Stanton on the email that you married our old friend, Grady?*

*Susan Gabriel*

Sara smiled and searched her memory for details about Julia: the way she laughed, the way she wore her hair. She wondered if they would still be friends if she had never moved away. As it was, their friendship had ended quietly, like two boats drifting away from a dock, each carried by a different current. After she left, Sara had ignored Julia's efforts to contact her. She had secretly hated her for moving away the summer before their senior year, even though it was through no fault of her own. Her father had accepted a prestigious teaching position in England. At the time Sara hadn't been the least bit happy for her. She had been too devastated at being left behind.

Sara hit reply.

*Dear Julia,*

*It's so nice to hear from you! I'd convinced myself my email had never arrived. Or that you'd long ago trashed it because you didn't remember me. . . .*

Grady cleared his throat as he stood at the door watching her.

Sara jumped for the second time that day. "I didn't hear you there," she said. "Did you finish?"

"Everything I wanted to get done tonight," he said.

Grady had been in his workshop building new kitchen cabinets. He pulled off his T-shirt and wiped the sweat from under his arms. The dark hair in the middle of his chest was slightly graying. There were flecks of sawdust on his arms, earthy glitter held in place by the sweat. Sara's memory flashed on a younger Grady. Skinny, with a chest devoid of hair, and prominent ribs—even though he had eaten as much as her and Julia combined—and an even more prominent Adam's apple.

"Did you make an appointment to get the car fixed?" Grady asked.

## Seeking Sara Summers

“Not yet,” she said. It had been weeks since her little run-in with the tree. Grady had been very calm about it when she had finally told him, his only comment being about how good their insurance was.

“Is there some reason you don’t want to get it fixed?” he asked.

“Of course not,” Sara said. But was there? Perhaps it was proof that she had almost gotten away. “I’ll get it done next week. Dented cars just aren’t high on my priority list right now.” Her number one priority was simply getting through the day.

“Are you coming to bed?” he asked.

“As soon as I finish.”

“Tons of papers to grade tonight?”

“The usual.” What wasn’t usual was for Grady to be this inquisitive. If she didn’t know better she would think that some part of him had intuited that Julia had been in touch.

“Well, goodnight then,” he said.

“Goodnight,” she answered. Sara listened for his footsteps ascending the carpeted stairs before continuing the email.

*... I did marry Grady. After you left we stayed friends and we both ended up going to U Mass. We have three children. They’re all grown up and have left home—two boys and a girl. Sam’s the youngest, he’s 22. Jessica’s 23 and John is 24. Jess and Sam work in New York City at the same investment firm and John is in law school in Boston. They’re great kids. I think you would like them. It’s still hard for me to believe I had any part in creating such beautiful, smart human beings. It’s also hard to believe that part of my life is over now. The house is very quiet these days.*

Sara debated what else to say. There had been a time when Sara could tell Julia anything. Should she tell her about the cancer? Or about how her life just didn’t make sense anymore?

*Susan Gabriel*

She wrote a paragraph about her illness and then quickly deleted it. It was too soon to share something so intimate. She began a new paragraph.

*... Julia, I love thinking about you being in Florence. Remember my obsession with Italy years ago?*

*It is wonderful to hear from you again. I look forward to getting whatever you sent. Meanwhile, tell me anything and everything about Italy!*

*Your friend,  
Sara*

Sara sent the email and then turned off the computer and the light. As she climbed the stairs an unexpected lightness filled her. She smiled again. Julia had remembered her.

Sara grabbed Luke's leash, deciding to give him a quick walk instead of just letting him out in the backyard. It was dark. An inch of snow covered everything. Luke peed on the dogwood close to the porch, a standard practice, while Sara retrieved a bundle of mail in the brass mailbox mounted next to the front door. She sorted through a stack of junk mail. The light bulb on the porch had burned out weeks before but neither Sara nor Grady could seem to remember to replace it. The nearby streetlight helped illuminate the sorting.

Hiding behind a pizza coupon was a blue envelope. Sara ran a finger along the letter's parameters. Its blue elegance stood out in glaring contrast to the junk mail and bills in her hand. She admired the precise handwriting and lovely color of the envelope before realizing that the letter had an Italian postmark. This must be what Julia was talking about, Sara thought.

Inside the envelope was an invitation to an art opening along with a handwritten note.

*Dear Sara,  
I know it's a long shot but I thought I'd send you an invitation to my art opening in April.*

## Seeking Sara Summers

*It was so nice to hear from you recently. I have been thinking of you and remembering the things we used to do as girls. We had a lot of fun, didn't we? I hadn't given my past much thought until now. I guess I'm becoming more reflective in my old age. (Ha! Please don't tell me we're getting old!)*

*Ciao,*

*Julia*

Luke tugged at the leash and Sara crammed everything back into the small brass mailbox except Julia's letter. She clutched the envelope to her heart. Her energy increased with each step down the walkway. Sara had to resist the urge to skip. What if she went to Italy?

*Don't be ridiculous,* the voice in her head chimed in.

But the mere possibility caused Sara's joy to bubble into a laugh. She walked several blocks in the dark moving in and out of the glare of streetlights, a clear destination in mind. She stopped in front of Julia's old house while Luke sniffed the rose bushes and christened them.

Sara remembered an earlier time when she and Julia had caught lightning bugs in the front yard. One summer they put them in jars thinking they would light up Julia's bedroom. Instead, they had all died by morning. Sara still felt bad about that and had not let her children participate in the practice.

Sara stared into her past. She and Julia had sat on those very steps swearing on a blood oath—well, not really a blood oath, Sara thought, she had been too chicken for that—but they had squeezed the promise into each other's clasped hands that they would move away from their little town some day and travel the world having adventures.

I didn't keep my promise, Sara thought. But maybe it wasn't too late. She jogged back to the house with more energy than she had had in months, and greeted Grady in the kitchen with an embrace.

Susan Gabriel



What readers are saying about *Seeking Sara Summers*...

“This is a different kind of love story. The story and characters are still haunting me. All I can say is “Wow!” I would recommend this book to anyone who loves a good story and can appreciate great writing.”

- Lily Stone, Author of *Spark of Magic*

"What a great story, a love story that spans time and distance! The characters are fully imagined but also *real*, and have stayed with me long after I finished the book. As they make their way from confinement to freedom, resignation to aliveness, they push the edge of the possibilities we all have within us for a fuller life. I think many readers will see themselves and will be inspired to climb whatever walls they need to scale to be who they really are. The writing is vivid and lyrical. The scenes set in Italy made me want to run out and buy a plane ticket. I've also been reading Gabriel's blog. Her writing is fresh, insightful and skillful. I'm looking forward to her next book." - J. Reid, Black Mountain NC

“I just finished reading *Seeking Sara Summers*, and wanted to drop you a note to thank you for an excellent story. I loved every moment, it was so very intimate to be inside Sara's head all through her journey.”

- Elena, Madrid, Spain

“I LOVED THE BOOK!!! That is the fastest I have read anything in a long time, couldn't put it down and I just bawled through parts!” - Jennifer V., Windsor, CO



*Seeking Sara Summers*

“My retired husband predicts that you have a best seller on your hands (at chapter 20). He grabbed up your book the minute it arrived. Then he adds, ‘you just don’t want to put it down, it is so well written.’ While I sit here and drool, waiting my turn.”

- Josephine L., Summerville, SC

“I started reading *Seeking Sara Summers* with my breakfast tea and couldn't put it down until I had finished it---even missed my trip to the gym. I laughed and cried and felt warmed by the Tuscan sun.”

- Ann B., Asheville, NC

“What a journey! I felt like I had been to Italy with Sara but even more vividly, I shared her journey of the heart.” - Carter G., New Hope, PA

“I didn’t get much sleep last night! I started *Seeking Sara Summers* and couldn’t put it down! It is terrific – the story and characters are beyond engaging, the writing is delightful and so “clean”, the descriptions are just enough to let the mind fill in, and the story, is so universal, and at the same time, NOT . . . I loved it. I really can see it on the NY Times Bestseller list. Send a copy to Oprah!!” - Deb Hall, Colorado Springs, CO

“Thank you for capturing so memorably the confusion, frustration, fears and longings--and ultimately the beauty of a woman's life.” - Zoe J., Greensboro, NC

“Both Sara and Julia are beautiful women that you would truly love to have in your circle of friends. I think whether you are married, single, partnered or whatever,

*Susan Gabriel*

many women will LOVE this book!”

- Phyllis P., Boston, MA

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