

Bloom Again

Marybeth Holleman

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FAIRBANKS

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Chapter 1

Elyse lifts the second half gallon of milk from the cart, her thoughts scattered like seeds in the wind until she sees a single image. Then she'll recall what she has managed to forget—except this time, the shifting winds of memory will not abate.

But for now, relentlessly, the conveyor moves faster than she, causing her to feel, once more, behind. She jams milk between orange juice and rice. It seems excessive, all this milk, but with her husband just back from another tour with Doctors Without Borders and their two sons visiting from college, she'll need it. Elyse sighs as she picks up a bag of oranges. She loves having them home, but she's already missing mornings spent alone with tea and sketch pad. She'd intended to finish that painting of James Lake before Dan returned, but has only succeeded in a series of drawings. She hasn't cracked open a single paint tube. Her show is six months off; she'd better get to it, or she'll have to display paintings done before her boys were born.

She drifts to James Lake in June: blue sky with wisps of cirrus clouds, cumulus row of lime-green birch trees, dark spikes of spruce flanked by a frothy line of willow, all mirrored in the azure lake. She wants to capture those bands of texture and light, show the perfect symmetry wedded to the tangle of cloud and forest.

She winces. Once again, inspiration arrives when she's far from her brushes. This morning is about groceries, not painting. Eggs.

Does she have enough eggs? Glancing up, she sees the cover of *Alaska* magazine. It's a full head shot of a polar bear, with that look of submission she loves to see on her Siberian huskies. She's about to smile when she reads the headline: *Bound for Extinction?*

The winds, and Elyse remembers, years ago, her friend Amy telling her about a colleague's experience. Flying over the Beaufort Sea for his biannual whale survey, he saw something neither he nor any other scientist had ever seen: facedown in the dark blue sea, thick limbs outstretched, floated four drowned polar bears.

It was just after a major storm, said Amy, and with shrinking sea ice, storm waves were stronger; polar bears, though excellent swimmers, can't endure the widening distances between icepacks and the increasing power of the storms. "But," Amy continued, as Elyse stood still as stone, "don't tell anyone yet, not until after he publishes his paper."

How well Elyse remembers this now, staring at the face of this polar bear. And how quickly she'd forgotten. She'd been so busy with—with what? Raising two sons. Sam was getting braces and resisting it with all his teenage-angst self, and Justin, in jazz band, was needing to be driven from one side of town to the other. Dan was off somewhere, some country on the opposite side of the moon, and she was juggling it all, so the ball that was drowned polar bears—and everything that meant—was easily dropped, rolling under the bed to join the gathering dust bunnies.

Something catches in her throat. She reaches for the magazine, tosses it onto the pile of groceries, and trains her gaze on the cartons of milk. It's her turn. She pastes on a smile for the checker, a young man who's quick and friendly. It's his speed she appreciates now, as the lump in her throat threatens to erupt.

Alone in her car, save for two sleeping huskies, she reaches for the magazine and skims the story. The polar bears' ice is shrinking. They're losing their habitat—the icepack they use for every aspect of their lives, from birthing cubs to hunting food. A warming climate is melting the ice, and even if every human on the planet immediately stopped emitting carbon, there's already so much in the atmosphere that the bears are likely doomed. This year's cubs, scientists predict, will be the last generation of Alaska polar bears.

Elyse stares at the words on the page, willing them to say something different. She looks out the front windshield, eyes fixed on the solid slopes of the Chugach Mountains. Can this be true? Just as she is reminded that polar bears are in trouble, she learns it's too late to save them. No. This she cannot, will not, believe. Of course we can save polar bears! Hadn't we saved bald eagles, gray whales, California condors, and all the birds of *Silent Spring*?

She jams her car into gear and heads for home.

**

Astrid's husband is late for lunch again. She stares out the window at another bluebird-sky day, trying but failing to distract herself from something that happened earlier. It just stuck in her craw, as her grandmaw used to say. She squeezes each of one hand's fingers between the opposite thumb and forefinger. Dean Thorn had been adamant about her taking this grant. Yes, she knows that half a million dollars would fund a dozen grad students. But the grant is for applied research. She doesn't do applied research, never has, not once in her twenty-three years with the university. She's built her career on basic research, on knowledge for knowledge's sake. And this one, well, it's clear as a bell that the funder knows the results they want. When an oil company offers to fund climate change research, any self-respecting scientist runs screaming in the other direction.

"Hi, dear," a soft voice says, as her husband touches her back with his hand. "Sorry to be late, but one of my students had the most interesting idea for a tomato sauce for braised zucchini."

Gareth's gushing enthusiasm is, for most people, contagious, especially paired with his singing southern drawl. It had been so for Astrid at first.

"That's nice, but I've got a meeting in an hour."

"Oh, yes, sorry!" he says, cheerily but forced, brown eyes blinking behind wire-rimmed glasses.

Not that she expects much from the meal. Because he teaches in culinary arts, Gareth often picks the restaurant for their weekly lunch date. And because Chapel Hill is a college town, there are endless quirky choices. Usually he chooses food over ambiance, and this time is no different: a small hole-in-the-wall in a rundown strip mall

near the interstate, a Filipino restaurant called Angeline's. Astrid would have preferred The Last Taco on Franklin Street, where her friend Charlotte's art is on exhibition. She finds Charlotte's paintings gaudy, but likes to support her work, and she likes the ambiance: professors and students mingling over intellectual discussions and margaritas—what one chemistry colleague calls his weekly seminar on liquid dynamics.

"So, how was the meeting with Dean Thorn?" asks Gareth.

"Tedious," she says. "A big ExxonMobil grant they want me to run."

"Oh! That sounds fraught."

"Yes. It's obviously applied research. I was appalled that he'd even ask me, after all these years. But it's money the department needs, apparently."

"Maybe you could take it and just farm it out to grad students."

"That's what Dean Thorn said. He said they'd just put my name on as lead researcher."

"Right! So do that!"

"Except I won't have my name on applied research, Gareth. You know that."

"Yes, of course," he says, staring at her. "Just trying to find a good compromise; you know me."

Yes, she does know him: a people-pleaser, always ready to compromise. Not like her father, who taught her to stand her ground. It's just as well her father never met her husband.

She straightens her back, smiles at Gareth, and asks, "So, a braised zucchini sauce? Will you try it for the reception tomorrow night?"

Evening, and Astrid walks home through the arboretum. They live twenty minutes by foot from campus, and she takes pleasure in the few extra minutes of walking the circuitous paths through trees rather than the straight line of the street sidewalk.

She enters by the pergola, a lush green tunnel that drips with the sweet grape-juice scent of wisteria. She brushes at a bee who nearly catches in her brown curls, then watches as he disappears into a pale purple blossom above her head. Nearby another bee stumbles out,

legs fat with yellow pollen, flying like a drunken sailor to another bundle of sweet nectar. Astrid sighs. Would that her days could be as clearly focused.

Exiting the pergola, she looks up, green eyes to the trees. The broad leaves of the tulip poplar are tinged yellow, bright dapple against blue sky. Foreshadowing fall, she knows, yet it seems early. Or maybe it's the drought. The last couple of years, summer rain has eluded them, and trees are showing signs of water stress, no matter how much the grounds crew waters and mulches. Astrid has given up washing her hair every day, even if it frizzes, just to save water for these trees.

A gray squirrel hops across her path, leading her to her favorite bench. She sits, dumping books and student papers beside her, and leans back against the weathered wood. She replays her conversation with Dean Thorn, feeling exhaustion wash over her.

She drops her head back to gaze up into the white pine's long lacy needles and dark scrolling branches. The needles, frothing from every twig tip, are like a carpet of clouds. As a child, she'd loved the story of the magic carpet and had dreamed, like many children, of flying. But for Astrid, the dream was not the flying sensation itself, or what new places she might find, so much as what she would get to leave behind.

Tears spring to her eyes. She doesn't raise a hand to wipe them away. She just keeps her eyes on the pine arcing above her, needles swaying almost imperceptibly, her skin warmed by the giving wood, the scent of wisteria pulsing in and out of her awareness. Fatigue drains from her, replaced by a surge of unheralded astonishment at this unadorned moment, as the boundaries between her, the pine, and the sky dissolve like wisps of a magician's smoke.

Two students walk by, chattering about a party Saturday night. "Three DJs," one says. "It's gonna be lit."

Astrid starts, as if from sleep. Both hands flutter to her cheeks and brush them dry, the exhaustion descending again as she pulls back into herself. She stands, smooths her tan knee-length skirt, pushes frizzing hair from her face, lifts her bag, and strides toward home.

**

Elyse does not go home right away. She's too upset to face her family, especially Dan, who would not understand her tears. And the thought of trying to explain it to him, of withstanding his volley of rational questions, knots her stomach. Instead, she drives to a trail-head parking lot that few people use, save teens on a Saturday night. The lot is empty, sheltered from passing cars by spruce and willow. She pulls a bottle of strawberry milk from the bag—one she bought for Justin, who loved it as a boy—and opens it, then flips the magazine's pages to find the article. She quickly starts to argue with it, as Dan would do, looking for flaws in the science, holes in the data. But it's a clear equation: no ice, no polar bears. She's trying to argue with reality. Lord only knows how many times she's done that, and to no avail.

Twirling a strand of thin hair, she lingers over a photograph of a sow with two cubs. Sitting on a blue-white expanse, the mother stretches her long neck out over her cubs. They both lean into her, one with head bent, forehead against the mother's sturdy leg, the other with chin resting on the sibling's back, mother's chin on the cub's head. It's a serene image of love and caring, of trust. A reminder of what so many species have in common with humans. Little do the bears know that their seemingly solid and endless ice home is melting away beneath their feet; little do they know that these cubs may never have the chance to raise cubs of their own.

The pulsing ache in her throat erupts. She throws down the magazine and grips the steering wheel, a sudden volley of sobs filling the car. Heat rushes through her body, the rising panic an unquenchable fire. Her bones, her muscles, melt, deflated, her throat dry as a desert. Then she falls silent and still. She is shocked at her own outburst but calm in the aftermath of it, empty and light. She steps from the car, opens the back door to let her dogs surge out, then swings back and grabs the strawberry milk as she would the hand of a child. She walks to the edge of the woods, slipping her thin frame between two spruce, needles pricking pale arms. Pushing through a bramble of elderberry, she keeps moving, eyes straight ahead, deeper into the forest.

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Late summer, the grasses are chest-high, the fireweed banners of cotton tufted with fuchsia flames. Elyse has shouldered through alder thickets and high-stepped patches of wild roses, slender thorns scratching bare legs, to stand in a clearing where a giant spruce lies broken. The trunk is riddled with the drill holes of the spruce bark beetle, the pattern of the tree's demise. She leans against the fallen trunk, fingering loose bark. A shower of needles from a branch above tumbles down, dusting her head and shoulders in the leached green bits of a dead tree.

She crumples to the ground. She's watched this forest come apart over the last two decades, watched towering stands of spruce hundreds of years old turn dull green, then reddish brown, then topple in a fall windstorm. The spruce bark beetle infestation raged like wild-fire through the Kenai Peninsula, laying waste to more than half the forested lands, then spread its tentacles to the Anchorage bowl. Below this ridgeline on which she sits, the mountainside looks like a giant game of pick-up sticks, littered with blown-over dead spruce.

And now, without spruce as wind protection, the big birches are falling as well. From pick-up sticks to dominos. These trees that grew up surrounded by the others, their shapes determined by close neighbors, can no longer stand without them. Even the forest floor is transforming, from tiny-leaved twinflowers and heathers to meadows of tall grass and fireweed.

Eventually spruce will return, thinks Elyse. Maybe. Or maybe the climate here will be too warm. The treeline will move north, spruce trees on tundra, forests where polar bears once denned.

She sits still, staring at the pockmarked tree trunk, tracing the scrolling lines of the beetle's hunger, as if they hold a code that explains the destruction. A pair of black-capped chickadees flit to a branch above her, floating down the trunk and closer to her tangle of straw blonde hair in small, quiet flights. A varied thrush scratches in the grasses nearby. Campbell Creek rumbles along far below through a narrow canyon, clear water bouncing off dark granite on a rushing bolt to Cook Inlet. Upstream, the Chugach Range rises, the jagged ridgeline to O'Malley Peak still limned with pockets of last winter's snow.

Leaning into a curve in the tree, she lets her head drop back, training her soft gaze upon the ridges, each scalloped dip and chiseled rise comforting in its familiarity. The water, flowing far below, hums steadily. Waves of sunlight wash the forest, limb and leaf, and the high notes of birds chime in the soft breeze. What if she just stayed here? What if she just slept right here, curled into this grass like a moose, woke to the symphony of kinglets and warblers, walked to the creek and knelt, drinking the clear water, scrounged a few berries and roots, and lived, for a while, like the animals?

A flare of sunlight crosses her face, and she squints, reaches for sunglasses. How did she get here? How did one magazine article, some words on a page, strike her down? She has a fortunate life, brimming with what she's chosen. She knows that's not a given, not even an option for most people. A life that would be called tidy except she's a scatterbrain. That's what Dan calls her—laughingly, of course, he never means to be cruel. It's a good life; she knows it; she remembers to be grateful for it. Lately, though, there are brief moments when she feels like the cottonwood by her favorite bend in the stream—the one who looked so strong and healthy until a storm snapped the tree in two and revealed the hollow core.

She sighs, puts one hand on her belly. Sips the strawberry milk, and remembers. When her boys were little, one of their favorite bedtime books was *Alaska's Three Bears*, about a black bear, a brown bear, and a polar bear roaming together across the state as each found the ideal environment to call home. Her boys loved that book so much that its corners were tattered, its cover stippled with grape juice and baby drool.

After reading it umpteen times, Elyse started reciting sequels. Every night the stories appeared, pulled from between waking and sleeping, where the edges of what's possible blurs to let in the light of creativity. The stories flowed, words falling one after another from her mouth, though she had no preconception of what she'd say next. She created an entire world, an intricate and safe world where the bears always found home. She talked until her sons were both asleep, drifting off beside them before returning to her own bed. And when Dan was on one of his DWB missions, they all slept together in the

big bed, the three of them snuggled together, safe and warm in the stories and each other. Like the polar bear and her cubs. She tilts her head to the sunlight, closes her eyes.

By the time she rises, the chickadees have all but landed in her hair, so still has she been for so long. She calls her dogs, who have risen to this off-trail romp with their usual unbridled joy. Sophie returns first, obedient girl that she is, but Elyse has to wait another half hour for Darlene. As her calls mingle with the creek's tumbling, her hand on Sophie's sun-warmed fur, two juvenile gray jays light nearby, trying out new voicings on this curious stranger who has ventured from the trails. Finally Darlene comes leaping through alder, blue eyes blazing that wild husky gaze. Elyse laughs, "Where have you been?" and ruffles the soft fur of her head. Sorrow lightened, she turns back the way she came.

**

At the dinner reception for a visiting scholar, Astrid brightens when she sees the slight figure of Professor Strilay, shock of white hair like a halo, come through her front door. A physics professor, he'd been her mentor when she first joined the faculty. At twenty-six, she had been one of the youngest ever hired, and his guidance through the political and administrative maze of the state's largest university had saved her more than once, even as his own star kept rising. Since, they'd remained close, routinely meeting for lunch every Thursday at the Carolina Coffee Shop. She appreciates his dry wit and sharp intellect, his fearlessness in speaking his mind. His is a mind that matches hers.

"Ah, you've extracted yourself from piles of papers long enough to join us," she says, holding out her hand.

"Yes, yes, wouldn't miss one of Gareth's feasts for the world," he says, laughing, enclosing her hand in both of his.

Astrid's husband is renowned in the university community for his innovative cooking, so theirs is often the house of choice for gatherings. The old stone house, though small, seems roomy—open spaces and sparsely furnished, save houseplants crowding the windowsills. Figs, bromeliads, orchids, cactus—so many that guests

often remark over them. One even counted the plants, announcing the results—forty-three—over Astrid's self-conscious objections.

"Well, I hope you won't mind greeting our guest in between bites," Astrid says.

Dr. Charles Lamont is visiting the university to speak to classes and give a public lecture on the effects of climate change on biodiversity. From the University of Cambridge, he spent two years on sabbatical, traveling the world to learn about changes in plant and animal life, as recorded not just by scientists but also by Indigenous communities and others who've lived in these places for generations. From Papua New Guinea to Siberia to Antarctica, he's had a remarkable journey to what remains of wilderness across the globe.

"I am looking forward to hearing about his work," says Professor Strilay. "I'm most interested in what he's learned about polar bears. I've a soft spot for them, I must confess."

"Well," says Astrid, "everyone knows that polar bears are toast."

"Whatever do you mean?" says Strilay, taking a step back, blue eyes widening.

"Well, you know," replies Astrid, "even if we stopped all carbon emissions now, what's already in the atmosphere will melt the polar ice pack, and without that, polar bears just aren't going to survive. It's too late to save them."

"I can't accept that," he replies, his voice taking on a sudden sharp edge, "and I can't believe you would so easily assume they're, as you say, toast. It's a surprisingly quick move to fatalism, especially from you."

"I'm just being realistic," says Astrid, her words slowing as she watches his face darken into one she does not recognize. "I didn't mean to sound flippant."

"Indeed," he replies, "that is exactly how you did sound, my dear. And I must say, it would do you good to take a look into your heart, what remains of it, and ask yourself why you have turned a cold shoulder to an entire species. As a paleobotanist, you should know better."

With this, Strilay turns and walks off. Astrid is stunned. She knows Strilay is an activist as well as an intellectual, a side of him

that has often confounded her. He had, as a young professor, been involved in UNC's anti-war movement in the late 1960s. He was one of only a few professors who'd been arrested, for which he was nearly denied tenure. That's how he learned university politics so well. Still, to take such offense at her statement, especially one fairly well accepted by the scientific community, seems, well, almost anti-intellectual. And the look on his face chills her to her bones.

For the rest of the evening, he avoids her, stepping out the back door to the herb garden when she enters the kitchen, staying engaged in conversation with faculty members she knows he finds tedious. She can't catch his glance, not even when they're separated only by the red couch. And rather than being the last to leave, his usual practice, Strilay makes a quick departure soon after dinner. Even Gareth notices the chill between them and asks Astrid about it later.

"Oh, it's nothing," she tells him. "Just a difference of opinion. We'll work it out."

But she isn't convinced herself. For the rest of the night—as she shelves plates and wine glasses, as she straightens the rugs, as she releases her unruly hair from a bun—his words ring in her ears. What remains of her heart. Such condemnation from the one person she thought understood her.