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New York Times bestselling
author of *The Great Alone*

KRISTIN HANNAH

Comfort & Joy

a fable

"An engaging holiday tale."
—*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

KRISTIN HANNAH

Comfort & Joy

A NOVEL



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Dedication

By Kristin Hannah

About the Author

Excerpt from The Nightingale

Part One

"It's a dangerous business ... going out of your door.
You step into the Road, and if you don't keep your feet,
there's no knowing where you might be swept off to."

—J. R. R. Tolkien

ONE

Christmas parties are the star on the top of my “don’t” list this year. Other things to avoid this season: Ornaments. Trees. Mistletoe (definitely). Holiday movies about families. And memories.

Memories most of all. Last year, I celebrated Christmas morning in my own living room, with the two people I loved most in the world. My husband, Thomas, and my sister, Stacey.

A lot can change in twelve months.

Now, I am in my kitchen, carefully packing frosted Santa cookies into Tupperware containers, layering wax paper between each row. On a strip of masking tape, I write my name in bold black letters: Joy Candellaro. When I’m done, I dress for work in a pair of black jeans and a bright green sweater set. At the last moment, I add little wreath earrings. Perhaps if I *look* festive, people will stop asking me how I am doing. Balancing the pale pink containers in my arms, I lock up my house and make my way to the garage. As I round the hood of the car, I sidle past the row of file cabinets that line the back wall. My dreams are in those metal drawers, organized with the kind of care only a librarian can manage.

I have saved every scrap I’ve ever read about exotic locales and faraway places. When I read the words and see the pictures, I dream of having an adventure.

Of course, I’ve been dreaming of that for ten years now, and since I’ve been single again for almost three months, and separated from Thom for eight months before that, it’s safe to say I’m a dreamer not a doer. In fact, I haven’t added to my files or opened one of the cabinets since my divorce.

I ease past them now and get into my sensible maroon Volvo. Behind me, the garage door opens, and I back down the driveway.

It is still early in the morning on this last Friday before Christmas. The street lamps are on; light falls from them in cones of shimmering yellow through the predawn shadows. As my car rolls to a stop at the bottom of the driveway, the headlights illuminate my house. It looks ... faded in this unnatural light, untended. The roses I love so much are leggy and bare. The planters are full of dead geraniums.

A memory flashes through me like summer thunder: there and gone.

I come home from work early ... see my husband's car is in the driveway. The roses are in full, riotous bloom.

I remember thinking I should cut some for an arrangement.

In the house, I toss my coat on the maple bench and go upstairs, calling out his name.

I am halfway up the stairs when I recognize the sounds.

In my mind and my memories, I kicked the door open. That's what I told people later. The truth was, I barely had the strength to push it open.

There they are, naked and sweating and rolling, in my bed.

Like an idiot, I stand there, staring at them. I thought he'd feel my presence as keenly as I'd always felt his, that he'd look up, see me and—oh, I don't know, have a heart attack or burst into tears and beg for my forgiveness or beg for forgiveness *while* having a heart attack.

Then I see her face, and a bad moment rounds the bend into horrific. It is my sister.

Now there's a "For Sale" sign in front of my house. It's been there for months, but who am I kidding? A wrecked marriage scares everyone. It's like a rock tossed into a still blue pond; the ripples go on and on. No one wants to buy this house of bad luck.

I hit the gas too hard and back out into the street, putting the memories in my rearview mirror.

If only they would stay there. Instead, they're like passengers, crowding in on me, taking up too much air.

No one knows what to say to me anymore, and I can hardly blame them. I don't know what I want to hear, either. In the school library, where I work, I hear the whispers that grind to a halt at my entrance and notice how uncomfortable the ensuing silences can be.

I make it easy on my friends—or try to—by pretending that everything is okay. I've been doing that a lot this year. Smiling and pretending. What else

can I do? People have grown tired of waiting for me to get over my divorce. I know I need to glide onto the track of my old life, but I can't seem to manage it; neither do I have the courage to form a new one, though, in truth, it's what I want. It's what I've wanted for a long time.

At the corner, I turn left. The streets of Bakersfield are quiet on this early morning. By the time I reach the high school, it is just past seven o'clock. I pull into my parking space, gather my cookies, and go inside.

At the main desk, the school secretary, Bertha Collins, smiles up at me. "Hey, Joy."

"Hey, Bertie. I brought some cookies for tonight's faculty party."

Her look turns worried. "Aren't you coming?"

"Not this year, Bertie. I don't feel too festive."

She eyes me knowingly. As a twice-divorced woman, she thinks she understands, but she can't, not really. Bertie has three kids and two parents and four sisters. My own math doesn't add up that way. "Take care of yourself, Joy. The first Christmas after a divorce can be ..."

"Yeah. I know." Forcing a smile, I start moving. In the past year, this technique has worked well for me. Keep moving. I walk down the hallway, turn left at the empty cafeteria and head for my space. The library.

My assistant, Rayla Goudge, is already at work. She is a robust, gray-haired woman who dresses like a gypsy and tries to write all her notes in haiku. Like me, she is a graduate of U.C. Davis with a teaching certificate. We have worked side by side for almost five years and both enjoyed every minute. I know that in May, when she finishes her master's degree in library science, I will lose her to another school. It's one more change I try not to think about.

"Morning, Joy," she says, looking up from the pile of paperwork in front of her.

"Hey, Ray. How's Paul's cold?"

"Better, thanks."

I store my purse behind the counter and begin my day. First up are the computers. I go from one to the next, turning them on for the students, then I replace yesterday's newspapers with today's. For the next six hours, Rayla and I work side by side—checking the catalog system, generating overdue notices, processing new books, and re-shelving. When we're lucky, a student comes in for help, but in this Internet age, they are more and more

able to do their school research at home. Today, of course, on this last school day before the winter break, the library is as quiet as a tomb.

That is another thing I try not to think about: the break. What will I do in the two and one-half weeks I have off?

In past years, I have looked forward to this vacation. It's part of the reason I became a school librarian. Fifteen years ago, when I was in college, I imagined traveling to exotic locales in my weeks off.

"Joy, are you okay?"

I am so lost in memories of Before that it takes me a second to realize that Rayla is speaking to me. I'm standing in the middle of the library, holding a worn, damaged copy of *Madame Bovary*.

The bell rings: The walls seem to vibrate with the sound of doors opening, kids laughing, feet moving down the hall.

The winter break has begun.

"Do you need a ride to the party?" Rayla asks, coming up to me.

"The party?" I say, as if I'm actually thinking about it. "No, thanks."

"You're not coming, are you?"

Rayla has always been able to do that: pierce my defenses with a look. "No."

"But ..."

"Not this year, Ray."

Rayla sighs. "So, what will you do tonight?"

We both know that the first night of our vacation is special. Last year, on this Friday evening, Stacey and I met up for dinner and went to the mall, where I agonized over the perfect gift for Thom.

It turned out to be my sister.

Those are exactly the kind of memories I try to avoid, but they're like asbestos: invisible and deadly. You need special gear to get rid of them.

Rayla touches my arm. "Have you put up a tree yet?"

I shake my head.

"I could help you decorate one."

"No, thanks. I need to do it myself."

"And will you?"

I look down into her kind gray eyes and find it surprisingly easy to smile. "I will."

She loops an arm through mine. Together, we walk through the quiet library and emerge into the crowded, busy hallways of the high school. All around us kids are laughing and talking and high-fiving one another.

In the parking lot, Rayla walks me to my car. There, she stops and looks up at me. “I hate to leave you alone for the holidays. Maybe Paul and I should cancel our trip to Minnesota.”

“Don’t you dare. Enjoy your family. I’ll be fine.”

“You and Stacey ...”

“Don’t,” I say sharply, and then whisper: “Please.”

“She and Thom will break up, you’ll see. She’ll come to her senses.”

I have lost count of the times Rayla has said this to me, and of the times I’ve said it to myself.

“Why don’t you go to one of those dream places of yours—like Machu Picchu or London?”

“Maybe I will,” I say. It’s what I always say. We both know the truth: I’m scared to go alone.

Rayla pats my hand and kisses my cheek. “Well. I’ll see you in January, Joy.”

“Merry Christmas, Rayla.”

“And to you.”

I watch her walk to her car and drive away. Finally, I get into my own front seat and sit there, staring through the windshield. When I start the engine, the radio comes on. It’s an instrumental rendition of “Upon a Midnight Clear” that immediately reminds me of better times in previous years. My mom loved this song.

Rayla is right. It’s time for me to get started on Christmas. There’s no more putting it off. Smiling and pretending will not get me through the holidays. It’s time for me to embark on this new single life of mine.

The traffic out of the high school is bumper to bumper with kids yelling out the window to one another, but by the time I reach Almond Street, the road is empty.

On Fifth Street, I turn left and pull into the lot beside a Chevron station, where Scout Troop #104 has set up their yearly tree sale. On this late Friday afternoon, I can see right away that the stock is pretty depleted, and frankly, there’s more brown on these branches than green. In this part of California, the trees go bad fast and I’ve waited too long to get a prime choice.

I wander through the fake forest on the corner of Fifth and Almond, nodding now and then to friends and strangers, trying to pretend I'm picking out the perfect tree. In truth, I'm trying not to look at them too closely. Finally, I can't stand it anymore. I choose the tree to my left, find a kid to help me, and reach for my wallet.

The nice young boy scout who takes my money hands me a receipt and a Kleenex.

I'm crying. *Perfect.*

By the time the tree is strapped onto my car, I'm a basket case. Sniffing and crying and shaking.

I am still in bad shape when I pull up to the ATM machine, though, thankfully, there are no witnesses to my meltdown. On a whim, I withdraw two hundred and fifty dollars. If I'm going to put up this tree, I'll need all new ornaments. I can hardly use the ones I collected during my marriage. And I intend to buy myself a killer gift to open on Christmas morning.

The thought of spending money on myself should make me happy; it's not something we high school librarians do a lot.

At least that's what I tell myself as I turn into my neighborhood.

Madrona Lane is a pretty name for a pretty street in a not-so-pretty suburb of Bakersfield. I've always appreciated the irony of living on a street named for a tree that doesn't grow here; especially in view of the fact that the developers cut down every green thing that dared to grow on the block. When my husband and I first saw the house it was run down and neglected, the only home on the cul-de-sac with grass that needed cutting and a fence in need of paint. The realtor had seen all these as possibilities for a young couple such as us. "The previous owners," she'd whispered to me as I stepped through a patch of dry-rotted floor in the bathroom, "went through a terrible divorce. A real *War of the Roses* thing."

We'd all laughed at that. Of course, it turned out not to be so funny.

I am almost to my house when I see Stacey standing in my driveway, all by herself.

I slam on the brakes.

We stare at each other through the windshield. The minute she sees me, she starts to cry. It is all I can do not to follow suit.

She's come to tell you it's over with Thom. It's the moment I've been waiting for, but now that it's here, I don't know what to do. Without

forgiveness, there's no future between Stacey and me, but how can I forgive a sister who slept with my husband?

I ease my foot back onto the accelerator and pull into the driveway. Then I get out of the car.

Stacey stands there, looking at me, clutching her ski coat around her. Tears glisten on her cheeks.

It's the first time we've really looked at each other since this nightmare began, and instead of anger, I feel an unexpected longing. I remember a dozen things about her, about *us*, just then, like our famous family road trip through the desert states. Hell in a Volkswagen bus with my mom singing Helen Reddy songs at the top of her lungs and smoking Eve cigarettes one after another.

I approach her slowly. As always, looking at my younger sister is like looking in a mirror. Irish twins; that's what our mom called us. We're less than twelve months apart in age and have the same curly copper-red hair, pale, freckled skin, and blue eyes. No wonder Thom fell for her; she's the younger, smiling version of me.

She takes one step toward me and starts to talk.

I'm leaving him.

It's a moment before I realize that that's not what she said. "What?" I say, stepping back, frowning.

"We can't go on like this," she says. "Not now. It's Christmas."

I feel upended somehow, confused. "I should forgive you because it's Christmas?"

"I know you won't forgive me, but it was over between you and Thom ..."

"We were having problems ..." I don't even know how to finish, what to say. None of this feels right.

Stacey bites her lower lip—a sign of nervousness from way back—then hands me a piece of thick white paper. I can tell instantly what it is.

A wedding invitation. The blessed event is set to take place on June sixth.

It hits me like a right hook to the jaw. "Y-you're kidding me, right? You should be breaking up with him ... not marrying him."

Slowly, she opens her coat. She is dressed for the holidays in red velvet pants and a white knit top with Rudolph stitched in sequins on the front. "I'm pregnant," she says, touching a belly that's flatter than mine.

And there it is, finally, after months of pretending to be okay, the thing I can't handle. For five years, I have dreamed of having a baby; I used to beg Thom to start our family. He was never "ready." Now I know why. It was me. He didn't want to have a child with me.

She's crying harder now. "I'm sorry, Joy. I know how much you want a baby."

I want to scream at her, to shriek my pain, maybe even smack her, but I can't seem to breathe. Tears are blurring my vision; they're not ordinary tears, either. They actually hurt. I can't believe she'd do this to me. To us. How can two girls who used to be peas in a pod have come to this?

"I never wanted to hurt you ..."

I can't listen anymore. One more blow and I'm afraid I'll go to my knees, right here in my driveway, and I've spent every day of the last year just trying to stand. I turn away from my sister and run to my car. A part of me can hear her yelling my name, calling out to me, but I don't care. The words are elongated somehow, stretched into meaningless sounds and syllables. Nothing makes sense.

I get into my car, start the engine and barrel backward, into the empty street.

I have no idea where I'm going and I don't care. All that matters is putting miles between me and that wedding invitation in my driveway and the baby growing in my sister's womb.

When I see the exit for the airport, it seems natural to turn off. Maybe even a destiny-at-work kind of thing. I park and go into the terminal.

It's small, but busy on this Friday. Lots of people obviously want to put miles between the heres and theres of their lives in the holiday season.

I look up at the departures board.

Hope.

A shiver goes through me; the word looks so out of place on the list, tucked as it is between ordinary cities like Spokane and Portland. I blink and look again, just in case I've gone slightly mad and imagined it.

Hope remains. It's in British Columbia, apparently. Canada.

There's no line at the counter. I walk there slowly, still somehow waiting to wake up, but when I get there, a woman looks up at me.

"May I help you?"

"The flight to *Hope* ... is there a seat?"

She frowns. "It's a charter. Just a second." She looks down at her computer screen. Fingernails click on the keys. "There are seats, but they were purchased in bulk." She glances around, catches sight of a heavy-set man dressed in camouflage fatigues. "Go talk to him."

Now, I'm not the kind of woman who strolls easily up to strange men, especially when they look like Burl Ives on a big game hunt, but this is no time for caution. I'm desperate. One more second in this town and I might start screaming. For all I know, Stacey is still in my driveway, waiting for me to return so we can "talk" more. I clutch my purse under my arm and go to him.

"Excuse me," I say, trying—without much success—to smile. "I need Hope."

He grins at this. "There isn't a whole lot up there. For a city girl, I mean."

"Sometimes just getting away is enough."

"You don't have to tell me that twice. Well, we've got an extra seat, if you want it. Say one hundred dollars? But I can't promise you a way to get back. We're a play-it-by-ear bunch."

"Me, too." Normally, I'd laugh at that, it's so far from the truth, but just now it feels right. Besides, I'm not even sure I need a way to get back. Who knows? This is a tear in the fabric of my ordinary life. All I have to do is step through. And I have my Christmas money with me. "Do I need a passport?"

"Nope. Just your driver's license."

I can leave here, make a quick stop and plane change in Seattle, show my identification, go through customs, and be in Hope by midnight. I make a decision to leave my own country in less time than it usually takes me to decide between packages of meat at my local Von's.

I whip out my wallet and find the cash. "I'm in."