

# RESTORING HOPE – SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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## CHAPTER 1

Woodsmoke hung in the morning air like a memory as Hope Elkins passed the newly restored *Hearth Café*, now open for business, and walked toward the road to set out her sign. Behind her, the last batch of par-baked pizza bases were finishing in the outdoor wood-fired oven, ready for toppings and a quick reheate once the orders began. The scent of crisping dough and olive oil drifted across the old bridge and down into Wombat Valley's main street.

Hope exhaled slowly, taking in the gentle warmth of this first day of autumn. After six months of quiet labour, which included installing a new commercial kitchen, overseeing the brick oven's construction, and sanding timber walls until her arms ached, the café was finally ready. It seemed longer than half a year since she'd walked away from city life and from a marriage that had splintered more than just her peace.

Her summer-lightened hair was twisted into a loose topknot, which she adjusted with fingers still carrying the faint scent of rosemary from the morning prep. The plain canvas apron she wore, embroidered with the café's logo, hid the flour streaks well. She brushed it absently, then stepped back to take in the building, admiring its freshly painted windows and railings, timber cladding, and wide verandah. This was what she'd built from the bones of grief. A space to begin again, not by forgetting, but by feeding into something new.

It had been a risk, pouring her inheritance into this project. But the valley, and her childhood memories of being here, had once held joy. Her grandmother had spent over fifty years living in Wombat Valley, baking and welcoming neighbours with open arms. Hope wanted that again. A place of warmth and nourishment. Something she could grow with her own hands.

The old cottage at the rear of the property, where she now lived alone with her tabby cat, Tiger, was too quiet. Loyal and a good listener, Tiger kept her company, but Hope missed the conversations she remembered from childhood visits. She could still hear her grandmother's stories, through the song of the kettle, as neighbours drifted in like family. She missed being around good people.

Taking a deep breath, she focused on being calm and steady. Today was reopening day. The dream she'd rebuilt from sorrow was about to begin. Hope went up the front steps and walked in.

Soon, the bell jingled above the café door.

"You've certainly brought this old place back to life," said Edith Alden, stepping inside wearing a felt hat over her short silver hair. Her sharp hazel eyes missed nothing. "You always were good with dough and people."

Hope's nerves hummed under her ribs. "Edith," she said warmly. "I wasn't sure if anyone would come."

"Oh, nonsense. Half the town's been waiting months for you to open. The other half are just slow walkers." Edith's eyes twinkled. "Even Joe Butler might be tempted to drop in and have someone feed him. That poor man's been working around the clock since losing his wife."

Hope smiled, touched by the familiar blunt affection. Edith had been one of her mother's closest friends, and a quiet pillar during the café's refurbishment. She often appeared with a warm meal at the end of the day, sensing when Hope hadn't eaten or slept properly. Now retired from the

family dairy farm, Edith and her husband Rob had given the reins over to their son Craig. Edith's presence was a reminder of her childhood. She represented warm memories that stayed, even when everything else had fallen apart. With free time on her hands now, Edith was focused on hobbies like making jam and preserves and keeping an eye out for those in town who needed some extra care.

She took a seat in the corner, her presence like a lighthouse.

Soon, more people filtered in: Hanna the florist, two kayaking instructors in worn sunhats, a trio of Edith's friends from nearby farms, and a young mother with a restless toddler.

The toddler knocked over a plastic cup, juice spilled across the table. The mother looked stricken, close to tears. Hope crossed the room with a cloth and a calm smile.

"You're doing great, by the way," she said gently, offering a fresh cup. "Bringing little ones to a café is not for the faint of heart."

The mother blinked. Then gave a fragile, grateful smile.

Hope moved between counter and oven, the routine of café work a rhythm she knew well from city life. The cafes before had been sleek inner-city places with polished tiles, and city investors watching every margin. But this one was hers, to start at her own pace, as part of the long journey to healing.

Before long, the lunch rush softened. The café hummed with quiet conversation and clinking cutlery. A breeze stirred through the open front doors.

From a table near the window, she heard the low murmur of two older women.

"She's done it up beautifully," said one. "Looks like somewhere you'd take visitors to impress them, but you can still relax here with friends."

Hope pretended not to hear, but the words warmed her more than she'd expected. This was what she'd wanted to create.

Just as the café emptied of lunch customers, the front door jingled again. A tall man, lean but muscled, stepped inside. His wavy dark hair a little windblown. Behind him at the door sat a large scruffy dog.

"Hope?" he said, voice low and even.

She looked up into his coffee-coloured eyes and recognised him. Joe Butler. That voice, steady and deep, was unfamiliar. Disarming. The kind she wasn't sure she trusted.

"You're the vet, right?"

"Guilty." He gave a quick nod, eyes flicking briefly to the floor before meeting hers again.

For a second, barely that, he forgot why he'd come. She was just a woman behind a counter, yet something about her stilled him. Slender. Watchful. Eyes the colour of the sky before rain, shadowed by tiredness.

But somehow he couldn't look away.

That surprised him most.

He recovered quickly. "Came to see what all the fuss was about. Also ..." He nodded back at the dog. "Picked up this stray from the farm next door. Might've twisted her paw chasing kangaroos this morning. Mind if we sit out back while I check her over?"

She hesitated, long enough for him to notice.

Joe's smile dimmed. "Sorry. That was presumptuous. I can stay out front—"

"Out the back's fine," she said walking forward, and opening the door to gesture around the side. "There's shade there. Water bowls too." She reached for something hospitable to say. "Since you're doctoring the wounded, I'll bring something out to keep you going."

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Joe smiled as he passed her, his sleeve brushing her arm. She flinched. A tightening in her shoulders she couldn't quite suppress.

Joe didn't comment. If he noticed, he gave her the dignity of silence. That, somehow, felt like kindness.

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Joe was sitting under the mulberry tree on the grass, examining the dog's paw, when Hope brought out a plate of margherita slices a few minutes later. His movements were slow and gentle, his voice a quiet murmur.

She stayed on her feet for a few moments, unsure whether to linger. But the quiet in the courtyard pulled at her, so she perched nearby, not quite settling.

Her eyes caught the flash of silver on his left hand. A wedding band. Still wearing it. She looked away, uncomfortable with how much she'd noticed.

"This girl's not limping badly," he said. "Just overdid it. Like most of us, chasing something too hard."

Hope raised a brow. "You mean like opening a café when half your life's still in boxes?"

He chuckled. "I meant me. Working every hour to keep the vet practice afloat while searching for a new partner. But, it sounds like, maybe you are too."

She caught herself smiling. When was the last time she'd felt so unguarded near a man?

They sat in quiet companionship, sunlight filtering through the tree. The dog rested at their feet. Brave little wrens darted around the courtyard, pecking at seeds between the bricks.

"You've done something special here," Joe said. "It feels ... safe."

Hope looked around the courtyard: its stone walls, fruit trees, tangled jasmine over the arch, circular firepit, and blanket of grass leading to wild-flower garden beds. It was everything she'd pictured. She had thought safety would be found in solitude, but now realised she'd built something meant to be shared ... and she would have to find a way to adjust to that.

"Thanks," she said quietly. "It's encouraging to hear."

From inside, the café bell jingled again. Hope stood, a feeling of discomfort rising at being alone with him for too long.

"I should get back."

Joe nodded, standing too. "If you ever need help with animals, taste testing, or anything else ... I'm around."

She gave a small, cautious smile. "Noted."

As she stepped through the café back door, something unfamiliar rose in her chest. Not wariness. Something lighter. A flicker of warmth.

A few moments later, at the kitchen window, she spotted Joe feeding the dog pizza crusts while chatting on his mobile phone. The two of them were framed in her view by overhanging jasmine. The feeling stirred again. She hadn't planned to feel anything today other than nerves, and maybe relief.

But what settled in her chest wasn't either of those things.

It was awareness, and the uneasy pull of a kindness she hadn't asked for. And wasn't sure she trusted.

## CHAPTER 2

The last of the café dishes clinked into the drying rack as dusk turned the Wombat Valley hills lavender.

Hope stood at the sink, hands resting on the edge. Her shoulders ached with that clean, honest fatigue that came from work, not fear. There was no tension, no waiting for someone's temper to turn. Just a café opening she was proud of. The day had gone better than she dared believe it would. But as the shadows stretched and the café emptied of warmth, so did the lightness in her chest.

Hope turned off the last light, double-checked the oven was cold, and stepped through the back gate toward her small cottage, tucked behind the rear courtyard. A lemon tree brushed her shoulder as she passed, and she caught a whiff of jasmine. Scents she used to love. Back before they began to remind her of other nights. Other kitchens.

The door creaked open and closed behind her. Silence. Then a soft meow.

Tiger stretched, his striped body arching as he wove around her legs.

"Okay," she said affectionately, reaching for a tin. "You've earned dinner too."

She fed him, then looked around the cottage. It was tidy, but sparse. Half her boxes still sat unopened, sealed like memories she wasn't ready to unpack. She'd thrown herself into the café refurbishment from day one,

anything to avoid the stillness of being in the cottage. It echoed—grief, pain, and her own disappointment. The silence wasn't restful. It pulled at old memories like threads. And she wasn't ready to unravel them.

Her neglected journal had lain on her bedside table, untouched for weeks. She wrapped a throw blanket tightly around herself as she sat on the edge of the bed. The ache in her chest returned. She picked up the journal, stopping on a page dated four months ago:

*"Lord, I want to believe You're still here. But everything feels hollow. My prayers feel like they hit the ceiling and fall back unheard. Where were you when I needed you?"*

Hope snapped the journal shut and rubbed her eyes. No wonder she hadn't opened it in weeks.

The ache stayed with her, low and familiar, as she brushed out her long wavy hair. The brush caught on a tangle, and she winced. Then a knock came at the door.

She opened it to find Edith holding a steaming mug of herbal tea and a thermos.

"Chamomile and honey," Edith said, lifting the cup. "For unwinding. Figured you might need it."

Hope hesitated before opening the door wider.

"Do you ... just wander around with cups of tea at night?"

Edith grinned. "Only for my favourite neighbours."

Hope took the mug. Its warmth grounded her.

"Thanks. It was a good day."

"You fooled most of the town into thinking you were born for this," Edith said, settling onto the weathered bench just outside the door. "But I know that look, Hope. You're worn thin. You're only thirty-five, but your eyes—those beautiful eyes of yours that shift from blue to grey depending

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on your mood—they're carrying too much these days. The light's still there, but so is the weight."

Hope hesitated, then joined her on the bench.

"I thought I'd feel better today. Proud. Relieved. But now it's quiet, and I just ... I don't know." Hope shook her head. "It all rushes back in the stillness. Things I don't want to remember."

Edith's eyes softened. "You didn't just leave a man behind when you came back to Wombat Valley. You left a life. And parts of yourself you're still trying to find." She paused, her voice quieter now. "You've been grieving a long time, love. Your mum died only four years ago. Your dad when you were still a girl. That's a lot of sorrow to carry."

Hope looked down into her mug. The tea smelled like her grandmother's garden. Safe.

"I used to think grief had a time limit," she said quietly. "Like after a year or two, the sharp bits were meant to dull. But sometimes it still sneaks up on me. I'll hear a song Mum loved, or see a father holding his daughter's hand, and it just ..." She pressed her lips together, shaking her head.

Edith didn't speak. She didn't need to.

Hope let out a slow breath. "I think I stopped expecting good things after Mum died. And after Mark ... I stopped expecting safe things too."

After a pause, she murmured, "I'm good at pretending. But when the lights go out ..."

Her voice caught. She looked away.

"... the memories become loud," Edith finished.

The wind rustled the gum trees. For a moment, neither of them spoke.

"I used to believe God protected people like me. Girls who tried to do the right thing. Who waited for a good man. Who prayed before saying yes."

Edith reached over and took Hope's hand.

"I don't think God promises we won't get hurt," she said. "I think He promises we won't be alone in it."

Hope's voice cracked. "So, where was He?"

Edith didn't flinch. She put her arm around Hope.

"With you. When you walked out. In the quiet that followed." She nodded out towards the café, "In this."

She paused, then Edith added, gently, "You know you don't have to have all the answers before you start praying again."

Hope swallowed. "I'm not sure He wants to hear from me."

"Oh, darling." Edith's voice softened. She rested a weathered hand on Hope's arm. "He never stopped wanting to."

Hope swallowed hard, then nodded. A tightness eased in her chest. She wasn't ready to pray aloud, but something shifted. A small, silent whisper inside her heart:

*"Are You still there?"*

And in the quiet, a word formed in her mind. It felt like ... the answer might be *yes*.

Tiger had been doing a figure of eight between their legs, but finally hopped up beside them, curling into a ball on Edith's lap with a satisfied purr. She scratched behind his ears.

"Wise cat," she said. "Knows good company when he finds it."

Edith reminded herself that true wisdom was knowing when to speak, and when to simply wait. Some truths are only safe to mention when the heart is ready to listen.

Edith began chatting about the café. "Ruth and Anne loved everything today: the pizza, the cake, and especially the coffee." She rolled her eyes affectionately. "They also love a good gossip, so you can bet the whole valley will have heard about your café by the morning. Brace yourself for a full house tomorrow."

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Hope smiled. "I might need to find someone to help soon. A second pair of hands."

Edith mentioned that a local teen, Ruby, had been out to their farm last week asking if they needed an extra hand with milking. They didn't. Craig had Bob's grandson coming over most mornings to help.

Hope tried to picture Ruby's face. "I don't think I've met her," she said.

"She's rail thin. Long dark hair, freckles. She's actually a pretty thing but looks wary. Like a girl always ready to run."

Hope raised an eyebrow.

Edith's tone gentled. "Her home life hasn't been easy. She's taken off with a few different young men over the years. But maybe she's thinking about staying put now. Looking for local work could be a good sign."

Hope let Edith's chatter and encouragement wash over her like sunlight after rain. She smiled as Edith entertained her with stories about Rob's latest attempts to sneak back to work on the farm whenever Craig wasn't watching.

By the time the thermos was empty, Hope felt drowsy and peaceful.

After saying goodnight, Hope stepped into the quiet cottage, took a long, hot shower, and slipped beneath the sheets.

And for the first time in a long while, sleep came easily. Without fear.

## CHAPTER 3

The late afternoon autumn sun spilled like honey across the hills of Wombat Valley. Hope wiped her hands on a tea towel, careful not to mark her new apron with tomato stains. The scent of distant woodsmoke curled through the air. Her cottage fireplace was finally working again after weeks of battling a blocked chimney.

She stepped out of the café's back door, stretching her arms above her head, then strolled toward her cottage to check the washing on the line. Beyond the sagging back fence, Bob Huxley's apple orchard glowed with rays from the setting sun. Its gnarled trees, lush grass, and fruit-heavy branches were just as she remembered from childhood visits to her grandmother.

Then, she heard a rustle in the still evening air.

Hope paused.

Through the branches, she caught a flash of movement. Someone was crouched low, with a dark hoodie, and quick hands tugging apples from a tree. Hope squinted. A young woman, or girl? Slender, wiry, and a defiant set to her jaw that looked like someone who'd been hungry too long to ask politely. Her backpack was slung low and already bulging.

"You alright out there?" Hope called, voice light but steady.

The girl jolted like she'd been shocked, eyes wide beneath the hood. An apple slipped from her fingers and rolled towards the fence. For a second, Hope thought she'd run. She looked like she might.

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"I'm not going to call anyone," Hope added, stepping slowly into view. "You just startled me."

The girl didn't move, but her eyes darted around like a cornered animal gauging whether it could clear the fence.

Hope crouched, picked up the apple, and tossed it underhand. "Might as well take the good ones."

The girl caught it with a fumble. Didn't thank her. Just stood there, half-turned like she might bolt.

"You're Ruby, aren't you?" Hope asked.

The girl stiffened.

"Small town. Word gets around. You've been next door asking for work at Edith and Rob's place?"

Ruby said nothing, her jaw clenched.

Hope hesitated. The girl could steal more than apples. There was something in her posture, tight and coiled, that reminded Hope of herself not long ago. Trying not to look like someone who needed help.

Hope glanced back at the café. "I've got a dinner crowd coming in tonight, and no one to help me keep up with the dishes. You any good with scrubbing plates or using a mop?"

Ruby blinked. "What?"

"I need help. You look like you could use a job. It seems like something we could help each other with."

Ruby scoffed, folding her arms tightly across her chest. "You're offering me work after you catch me?"

Hope shrugged. "Apples fall off trees. People get hungry. You're not the first."

There was a beat of silence. A kookaburra laughed somewhere up in the gums.

"I'm not some charity case," Ruby muttered. The words were hard, but her posture said otherwise.

"It's not charity. It's work. Pay's nothing glamorous, but there's pizza at the end of it, and no one yelling at you. What do you reckon?"

Ruby's gaze narrowed, suspicious. But something flickered behind it. Hunger. Weariness. A tiny fracture in the wall. Hope could see the quiet calculations of someone who'd learned not to trust kindness too quickly.

Finally, Ruby nodded and tucked the apple into her backpack. "Just for tonight."

Hope smiled gently without pressure. "Okay."

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Later, while Ruby had a shower and changed into some clean clothes Hope had dug out for her, Joe arrived at the back door of the café. The stray dog, now looking brushed and tidy, was faithfully beside him.

Joe shrugged. "There's no microchip, and no one's claimed her. That's unusual for an Aussie Shepherd. They're valuable and loyal."

Hope realised where this might be going and said, "I can't really keep her at my cottage, as I'm usually over here. She'll probably escape and wander off."

"She's already made herself at home here," Joe said. "And she likes your pizza scraps, by the way. So, I'd say she'll be keen to stay right here with you, keeping people company and an eye out for any food on offer. When we were last here, she licked the plate clean."

Hope raised an eyebrow. "This is all part of your grand plan to leave a dog on my doorstep, isn't it?"

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Joe gave a sheepish grin. "Caught me. I'm hopeless at saying no to strays, four-legged or otherwise. And, I do have a habit of matching them up with good owners."

The dog wagged her tail happily, tongue lolling.

Hope sighed, but a smile tugged at her mouth. "Alright. Trial run. But just so you know, I'm not great with surprise visits from men. Or with advice I haven't sought."

Joe's smile faded. "I hear you. I can step back. I'll only offer help if you ask for it."

Hope stiffened, the old urge to protect herself rising like a shield. But when she looked at Joe, there was no trace of mocking or judgement, only quiet understanding.

"Healing takes time," Joe said gently. "That's something I've come to learn. But even in the ruins ... peace can begin to grow. Especially when life slows down enough for you to hear your own voice again."

Hope was about to shrug it off, maybe make a joke, deflect the moment.

But something in his tone and stillness made her stop.

Hope looked away. Then turned back. She wanted him to understand.

"It wasn't physical violence," she said quietly. "Not in the way people expect. But he ... controlled everything. Constantly put me down."

Her voice flattened. "He wanted to make me feel small."

Joe stayed still, hands in his pockets.

He didn't interrupt. Didn't try to smooth it over.

"I told myself it didn't count because there were no bruises," she added. Her throat tightened. "But I walked on eggshells every day. Like I was the problem."

She hadn't planned to say that. But the words had slipped out, like something that had been waiting for its moment.

The dog sat between them now, tail sweeping slowly across the brick pavers.

“I still flinch sometimes,” Hope whispered.

Joe knelt, resting a hand gently on the dog’s back.

“That kind of fear doesn’t vanish overnight,” he said. “It leaves a deep scar. One that keeps getting bumped.”

Hope met his eyes, reluctantly. She didn’t see pity. Just quiet knowing.

“Healing takes time,” he added. “And trust ... that’s earned. No rush.”

She nodded, swallowing the emotion in her throat.

Joe rose, brushing dog hair from his jeans. “I’ll leave you to it. Just call if you need anything. Dog-related or otherwise.”

He paused, then gave her a small salute. “Or tell me to shove off. That works too.”

Hope laughed unexpectedly, a small puff of air through her nose. She sighed with relief. “Thanks. I’ll ... keep that in mind.”

As he walked away, the dog turned to look at Hope, then back to Joe. Torn loyalties.

She watched Joe leave. The dog then placed her paw on Hope’s foot, claiming ownership. Something soft unfurled inside her. She exhaled slowly.

It wasn’t fear, and it wasn’t dread.

Not trust, exactly, but the absence of threat.

And that was something.

## CHAPTER 4

That evening, the café glowed in the way that Hope loved best, with low amber lights strung along the rafters and the scent of dough crisping in the oven.

She paused. This was the kind of warmth she used to dream about at night, when she huddled on the couch under quilts, too wary to sleep in her own bed. Now she was building something different. A place where people could feel safe and whole.

Hope glanced toward the back sink, where Ruby stood, sleeves rolled up and steam rising from the industrial tap. The girl moved stiffly, scrubbing a tray as if it had personally offended her.

"It's not a crime scene," Hope said gently, passing by with an order.

Ruby didn't look up. "It was really greasy."

"That's kind of the point. Good pizza leaves evidence."

The corner of Ruby's mouth twitched. Almost a smile.

The dinner crowd had started to arrive. Nothing wild, just a half-dozen young guys in flannel shirts and a group of older local women. Hope greeted them with her usual calm, but she could feel their glances towards the kitchen. A few eyes lingered on Ruby.

From the front table, old Mrs. Wilkinson leaned toward her friend and muttered just loudly enough: "That's Maureen's girl, isn't it? The one from the van parked on the field down behind the pub?"

Hope caught it, and so did Ruby. Her shoulders tightened, and her scrubbing became faster. Hope stepped behind the counter and poured a soda water with lime and a sprig of mint. She went and placed it beside Ruby at the sink, not just to refresh her, but to show anyone watching that Ruby belonged here.

"You're doing fine," she said. "They'll talk. That's what people do here. It doesn't mean they get to decide who you are."

Ruby didn't respond, but her scrubbing slowed.

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Later, as Hope pulled pizzas out of the oven, she watched from the corner of her eye. Ruby moved like someone used to walking on eggshells: flinching slightly when the oven door slammed, shrinking away when a man laughed too loudly at a nearby table. Hope recognised all of it. The invisible language of someone trying to disappear.

After the rush, when the café had quieted and Hope was wiping down a table, Ruby hovered near the back door.

"Do I ... keep going?" she asked. "Or am I done?"

Hope looked up and nodded slowly. "You're free to go if you want. But there's leftover pumpkin and feta pizza if you're hungry."

Ruby hesitated. Her stomach growled loud enough to make her blush.

Hope put some pizza slices from the oven on a plate and placed it on the front counter. "You can eat in the kitchen if you'd rather not deal with the stares."

Ruby took it wordlessly, retreating to the back. Hope heard the soft creak of the stool and the clink of a plate. A long pause. Then words drifted out of the kitchen. "This is good. I don't remember the last time I tasted something like this."

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Hope smiled to herself and kept wiping down tables.

She knew the signs of someone starving for more than just food.

"Where are you sleeping tonight?"

Hope let her question hang in the air as she went out to say goodbye to the last table of customers. When she returned to the kitchen, Ruby was just washing up her plate. Hope pushed open the door of the large storeroom next to the kitchen which had a mattress on the floor made up with sheets, a pillow and blanket.

"I used to bed down in here some nights when I was repainting the cottage and couldn't stand the paint fumes." Hope smiled at Ruby as she said, "It's nothing fancy, but it's warm. And safe."

"Aren't you worried that I'll take something and bolt?"

Hope paused, choosing her words. "I guess that's possible. But you'd be walking away from steady work and free hot meals here if you stay. So, it's up to you."

Ruby shrugged, still clinging to her defences. Then cautiously said, "I could just camp here tonight and see how I feel in the morning."

Hope nodded. "That sounds like a safe option."

After locking up the front door, Hope said goodnight to Ruby.

"Could I keep Asha with me?" Ruby asked, gesturing into the room.

Hope followed Ruby's hand to the stray, already curled up asleep in the corner of the storeroom.

"Asha?" Hope questioned.

"She's got ashy grey colours, like fireplace soot," Ruby explained.

Hope smiled. "It looks like she has already claimed her spot in here with you."

Ruby's eyes softened as she looked at the dog. "She makes me feel protected."

Hope nodded, her throat tightening as she locked the back door. "I'll see you both in the morning."

As Hope walked slowly across the backyard of the café to her cottage, she realised it felt different having Ruby and Asha sleeping on the property.

Maybe the trial wasn't just for Ruby, or the dog.

Perhaps, she was testing herself too.

To see if she was ready to start letting people back in.

## CHAPTER 5

The café courtyard buzzed with noise and laughter, full of hungry customers of all shapes and sizes. Chairs scraped softly on the brick pavers, children darted amongst tables, and a chorus of happy barking echoed across the yard. The pizza oven crackled as Hope slid out another woodfired crust, the scent of basil and bubbling cheese drifting on the breeze.

Earlier that week, Ruby had gone to Joe's clinic with Asha to buy her a collar and lead. She'd overheard him mentioning the final Puppy Preschool class, and that's when the idea sparked. She'd suggested to Hope and Joe that the group come to *The Hearth* for a graduation celebration on Sunday afternoon.

Hope had been hesitant at first about having so many young dogs in the café backyard, but Ruby had been so enthusiastic, and surprisingly persuasive, that she'd agreed. "It'll be great for business," Ruby had said. So far, she'd been right.

"Next up—Coco!" Joe called with a grin, holding up a lopsided paper certificate.

A small dachshund in a dog burger costume bounded toward him, dragging her six-year-old owner, with a series of enthusiastic snorts. Laughter rippled through the group.

Ruby appeared with a fresh jug of sparkling lemon myrtle water, refilling glasses and offering napkins as she moved around.

“Second costume change for Coco,” Ruby whispered to Hope with a smirk, brushing flour from her arm.

“She’s setting the bar high,” Hope murmured, watching the girl lift her pup in front of the small crowd.

Ruby had thrown herself into planning. She’d baked puppy biscuits, sketched a themed pizza menu, and even drafted a rough afternoon program. It was amazing to see her blossom so quickly in a space where she felt safe and useful.

Now, as Hope watched her weaving through the group gathered on picnic blankets and courtyard chairs, she noticed how easily Ruby remembered every name, both human and canine. It seemed to come naturally. Hope made a mental note of it. Ruby had a gift: for names, for people, for finding her place in the moments that mattered.

By the time the last “graduate” had been patted and praised, the courtyard was full of conversation and the warm glow of shared joy.

Someone called out, “You should do this every week!”

Hope half-laughed, wiping her hands on a tea towel.

Ruby, eyes sparkling as she collected empty glasses, leaned towards Hope with a grin. “What if we did? Pets & Pizza Sundays—crusts for humans, crumbs for canines.”

Laughter rippled again, followed by nearby murmurs of agreement.

“I’d come,” said a young mum, scratching behind her beagle pup’s ears. “So would Rocket.”

Others chimed in, saying they had friends with well-behaved dogs who’d love to come to a regular Sunday pizza afternoon in the café yard.

Joe caught Hope’s eye and raised his brows. “Could be something,” he said, his tone low and easy.

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Hope shrugged, aiming for casual. But something fluttered, unfamiliar and light, like hope testing its wings. The joy in the courtyard felt real. Earned. And maybe ... repeatable.

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Later, after the last of the pet owners left the yard, Ruby wiped down tables and emptied water bowls. She worked with a quiet happiness, like small things carried real weight.

Ruby glanced up and said enthusiastically, "We could have a 'Dog of the Week' photo wall, have leftover crusts in a jar for dogs, or even a custom chalkboard menu for dog-safe snacks?"

Hope gave a slow nod, remembering how Ruby's eyes had lit up earlier and how easily she connected with the locals. As she stood there watching Ruby, for the first time Hope started to think of her not as a stray teen, but as part of the team she wanted to build here at the café.

She took a step closer and said gently, "Ruby, how old are you?"

Ruby didn't flinch at the question. While scrubbing at a splash of pesto on the table, she said, "I turned eighteen last month."

Hope nodded slowly. "And your mum? She's still in town?"

Ruby's shoulders stiffened just slightly. "Yeah. She's in that old caravan behind the pub. It's not really safe there. Her boyfriend's got a temper, and ... I just couldn't stay."

Hope didn't press. She just let the words land and settle between them, heavy but not unbearable.

"Well," she said, "why don't you go inside when you're finished and jot down your pet customer ideas?" She paused, then added with a small smile, "I think you might be part of our new marketing team."

Ruby beamed at the praise and nearly skipped as she headed inside.

As the sun was just stretching its last rays across the valley, Joe stayed to put chairs back around the tables. There was a companionable silence between himself and Hope.

After a few minutes, Hope spoke softly ... almost to herself. "I didn't expect to enjoy this afternoon with all that noise and chaos."

Joe waited a few beats, then replied gently, meeting her gaze, "Joy can be loud too."

Hope looked away and nodded.

Joe didn't want to press. Instead, he lightened the moment by gesturing toward Ruby, who could be seen sitting inside through the café's back door, hunched over a notepad with a pencil between her fingers and a grin on her face.

"I think you might have found yourself quite a gem there."

Hope looked in at her. She noticed the way Ruby's brow furrowed as she sketched out ideas, the way her whole body leaned toward the possibility of something good. "You're not wrong," she said quietly.

There was a pause. Hope glanced down at the cloth in her hands, then added, her voice softer now, "She can't live at home, it's ... not safe. She's had to grow up fast."

Joe's smile faded into something steadier. He just nodded.

"Thanks for your encouragement in making this afternoon happen," Hope said.

"It's all part of the service in being a local small-town vet," Joe replied lightly as he turned to go. He stopped at the edge of the gate and looked back, smiling. "You're building more than a café, Hope."

Before she could reply, he turned again and called out, "See you, Ruby!" through the open door. Ruby waved without looking up.

## RESTORING HOPE

Hope watched him walk away, his figure steady in the fading light, and then turned back to the warm glow inside. To look at the girl with a messy ponytail and a page full of ideas who had already started to feel like family.

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Later that night, the café sat quietly again, shadows from the lights over the counter stretching long across the timber floors. Hope ran the cloth around areas still dusted with flour and flecked with pieces of basil. Walking past the storeroom, she paused to look in and saw Ruby and Asha curled up together on the mattress.

She reached for her notepad, scribbled down the words *Pets & Pizza Sundays?* and pinned it to the fridge with the old paw-print magnet Ruby had found in a drawer and left strategically on the bench for her to see.

Hope stood back, brushing hands on her apron. She wasn't sure if this was her saying yes to letting people in, but it felt close. And for now, close was enough.

She clicked off the lights, one by one, until only the fairy lights outside in the backyard glowed above the café tables, soft, golden and waiting.

## CHAPTER 6

The café was quiet on Monday mornings. It was Hope's chosen day to rest from customers, to catch up on orders and bake cakes for the week ahead. A slow exhale after the weekend. The rush of Sunday had passed, leaving the scents of baking in the air.

Hope had just finished a flourless orange and almond cake that was cooling on the kitchen bench. She came out to see Asha who was sprawled beneath the front counter, her soft snoring a rhythm that Ruby seemed to match. Ruby was curled in a sunny corner of the café on the floor, with a sketchbook open and a teacup going cold.

Hope began restocking the tea shelf when the bell above the door jingled softly. Glancing at the clock, Hope wiped her hands on a towel and turned around.

A fit and slender kind-eyed man in his early fifties walked towards the counter, smiling.

"Hope Elkins?" he asked in a warm, rumbling voice. "Sorry to drop in unannounced. I'm Tom. Pastor Tom Harvey. From the community church in town."

Hope stiffened slightly. "Oh. Yes, hi. I've ... seen you around."

Pastor Tom looked around the café, nodding approvingly.

"I realise you are closed today, but I hope you don't mind me quickly popping in."

## RESTORING HOPE

Hope straightened, already bracing herself. She forced a politeness. "Not at all."

Tom spoke sincerely. "The place looks great. You've done so much work. I think your grandmother would have been so proud of you."

Hope felt emotions rising at the mention of her grandmother and swallowed them back down. She wasn't sure if this was a compliment or the lead-in to something heavier.

Tom continued, "Edith's mentioned you to me a few times. Told me you're finding your way back home, and that you're making this café into something more than a business."

Hope raised an eyebrow. "She's always been a cheerleader for me. Even from afar."

Tom grinned. "She's got the spiritual gift of connection, whether it's souls, stories, or new friendships."

Hope rolled her eyes. "Please tell me she didn't mention Joe Butler to you."

"She only mentioned that he's been turning up at your café like a stray." Despite herself, Hope laughed.

Tom's tone softened. "The truth is, I came to let you know that if at any stage you feel ready, we'd love to welcome you to visit our church community. We have a women's group that meets on Thursday evenings. It's low-key. Tea and coffee, a bit of Bible reading together. It's not perfect, but it's real. You'd be welcome."

Hope looked down at the counter, her heart thudding a little too hard.

She wasn't ready for Bible study, group prayer, open wounds, or well-meaning platitudes.

"I'm not sure," she said honestly. "Church feels ... complicated."

Tom nodded, pausing before he quietly spoke. "God's not complicated. People are. And He's very patient with them."

Hope bit her lip. "I appreciate the invitation. I'm just not sure where I stand with all of it yet."

"That's okay." He reached into his coat and pulled out a brown paper bag. "My wife Eve thought you might find this helpful." He pulled a slim book out of the bag: *Grace in the Broken Places*.

Hope's smile didn't fade, but it wavered, hesitant. She ran her thumb along the edge of the cover. "That's thoughtful."

Pastor Tom spoke kindly. "We've also got a small group that meets at the church monthly, women who've walked through some hard places. They are meeting next Monday evening at 6pm. No pressure. Just a cuppa and real conversation."

Hope didn't answer immediately. She heard Ruby stand and drift closer, curiosity flickering in her eyes. Asha stirred, her tail began thumping softly against the timber floor.

"Thanks," she said at last. "I'll think about it."

Tom stepped back toward the door. "And Hope?"

She looked up.

"When you're ready, you don't have to find your way back to God. He's already on the road with you."

The bell jingled again as he left.

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The sun was warm on the gravel path, and the café's front garden stirred with the scent of thyme and lavender. Asha bounded across the open space, tail high, ears flopping, chasing the stick Ruby had flung with more energy than she usually had in the mornings.

Hope knelt a little further back among her herb beds, gently loosening the soil around a pot of parsley, the soft rustle of leaves and the low hum

of bees keeping her company. She couldn't hear what Ruby was chatting to Asha about but smiled at the girl's warm affection for the dog that was growing daily.

Ruby brushed wind-blown hair from her face, watching Asha run back with the stick. "Good girl," she murmured, crouching to ruffle the dog's scruffy ears.

A familiar voice called from the street.

"Looks like she's got you well trained," Joe said, leaning on the timber post out the front, his smile easy and warm.

Ruby straightened, her smile pulling at her mouth. "She's got lots of energy."

Joe stepped closer, crouching to pat Asha, then glancing up at Ruby. "How are you settling in?"

Ruby hesitated, shoulders giving a small shrug. "I'm thinking I might stay around here for a while." She glanced sideways at Asha. "I sleep better when she's near."

Joe nodded thoughtfully. "Animals do that. They help us regulate and model healthy life patterns like needing play and rest. And they instinctively know who is safe to trust."

He reached into his coat pocket and handed Asha a small treat, which she gobbled up enthusiastically.

"We've got a quiet little program at the church," he added. "Pet companionship. Nothing fancy. We visit elderly folks who are shut in and lonely. Some haven't had a proper conversation all week, until a dog walks through the door. It softens something."

Ruby tilted her head, curious. "You mean ... people just want to see a dog?"

Joe chuckled. "More than you'd think. Dogs bring warmth without words. Just showing up can change things. My chocolate Labrador, Bounty, knows how to charm all the elderly ladies."

Ruby was quiet for a moment. Asha nosed at her palm, and she absently stroked the Aussie Shepherd's head.

"Could I do that?" she asked quietly. "Visit someone, I mean. With Asha."

Joe studied her face, careful not to crowd the moment. "I think you'd be really good at it."

A breeze passed through the garden, stirring the scents of basil and gum leaves.

"I just ..." Ruby looked down, then back up. "I want to give something back. Even if it's small. Asha and I, we've helped each other. Maybe we could help someone else feel ... not so alone."

Behind the herb patch, Hope's hands had stilled. She'd heard their conversation and looked up through the rosemary, watching Ruby as if seeing her for the first time. She began to see her not just as a fragile guest under her roof, or a girl in need, but as someone with a soul full of quiet wisdom. Someone hurt, yes, but also someone reaching out to give.

Hope felt her throat tighten. There was a kind of healing that didn't always start with therapy or books or even prayer. Sometimes it started with a dog, and a stick, and the simple desire to make someone else feel seen.

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Later that evening, Hope looked out from her cottage. The café had been empty all day, but the stillness now felt different. Heavier, quieter. The stars were scattered sharp and clear above the gum trees, and a breeze moved gently through the jacaranda, rustling the leaves like whispers.

## RESTORING HOPE

Barefoot at the door, Hope stood wrapped in an old cardigan, a mug of tea cooling in her hands. The faint glow from the café windows across the yard was comforting. She could just make out a sliver of light beneath the storeroom door in Ruby's makeshift room and imagined the familiar shape of Asha's silhouette sitting inside.

Hope was glad Ruby had the dog. And the space. Even if it was temporary. Even if none of them were quite sure what came next.

Her gaze dropped to the small table near her cottage door. *Grace in the Broken Places* sat where she'd left it, the brown paper bag now folded neatly beneath it. She hadn't touched it all day, but somehow it still felt like it was waiting.

She picked it up slowly, weighing it in her hands as if she was measuring its worth. The cover was soft to the touch. It had cool blues, with the picture of a shaft of light through a broken windowpane.

She sank into the armchair by her hearth, the coals still faintly warm from earlier. Silence wrapped around her, not unfriendly, just ... watchful. She hadn't expected to be moved by Ruby's quiet courage today. Or by Joe's soft steadiness. But something had stirred. Enough to open the book.

She half-expected it to feel too neat, or preachy. But the first page made her pause.

"To those still standing in the rubble, unsure if grace can reach them there."

Her fingers closed over the edges of the page. She looked toward the window again, to the soft glow of the café and the quiet life growing inside it.

She didn't feel ready for faith. Not in the traditional sense. But she did feel ... hollowed out. Like a field after fire. And maybe that was a place to begin again from.

She opened the book again, looked at just one page, one quiet beginning, and let the words find her in the stillness.

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The following afternoon, the sun was dipping low behind the trees, casting long shadows across the gravel drive outside a weatherboard cottage. Joe leaned against the ute parked by the fence while Hope stood beside him, arms loosely crossed, watching.

Ruby had asked Hope to come along, but at the last minute asked if she could try visiting Anne Lucas alone. Ruby was now standing on her porch; Asha close by her side. She held a small paper bag—Hope had seen her pack it with leftover muffins that morning, insisting they were too good to waste.

Anne opened the door with a cautious smile, one hand braced on the screen. “You with the church?”

Ruby nodded. “Sort of.” She gestured towards the car. “Joe runs the program. I’m just ... showing up.”

She hadn’t over-explained or tried to be charming. Just stood there, awkward and real, until Asha stepped forward and placed her front paws gently on the door mat, tail wagging low and slow.

Anne’s face softened. “Well, now. Aren’t you a beautiful girl?”

Within minutes, the three of them were seated on the verandah. Ruby was perched on the step, Asha nestled at Anne’s feet. Ruby handed over the muffins with shy pride. Anne poured tea from an old teapot and began to talk. About her garden. Her late husband. And her chickens recently being attacked by foxes.

Ruby listened.

end

## RESTORING HOPE

Hope watched from the roadside. She could see that Ruby's posture, with shoulders relaxed and eyes soft, showed that she wasn't performing. She was simply there.

Joe glanced at Hope. "She's better with people than she realises."

Hope nodded, swallowing against a sudden lump in her throat. She remembered it had been only a few weeks ago that Ruby was a girl who could barely look her in the eye.

"She's giving herself to people," Hope said, more to herself than to Joe.

They stood there in silence for a few moments, watching the unlikely trio share tea, crumbs, and quiet company in the fading light.

Hope thought of the book again, and the quiet words from last night she hadn't yet let in.

You don't have to be whole to be welcomed. Just willing.

Maybe Ruby wasn't the only one showing up.

Hope wondered if she was almost ready, too.

