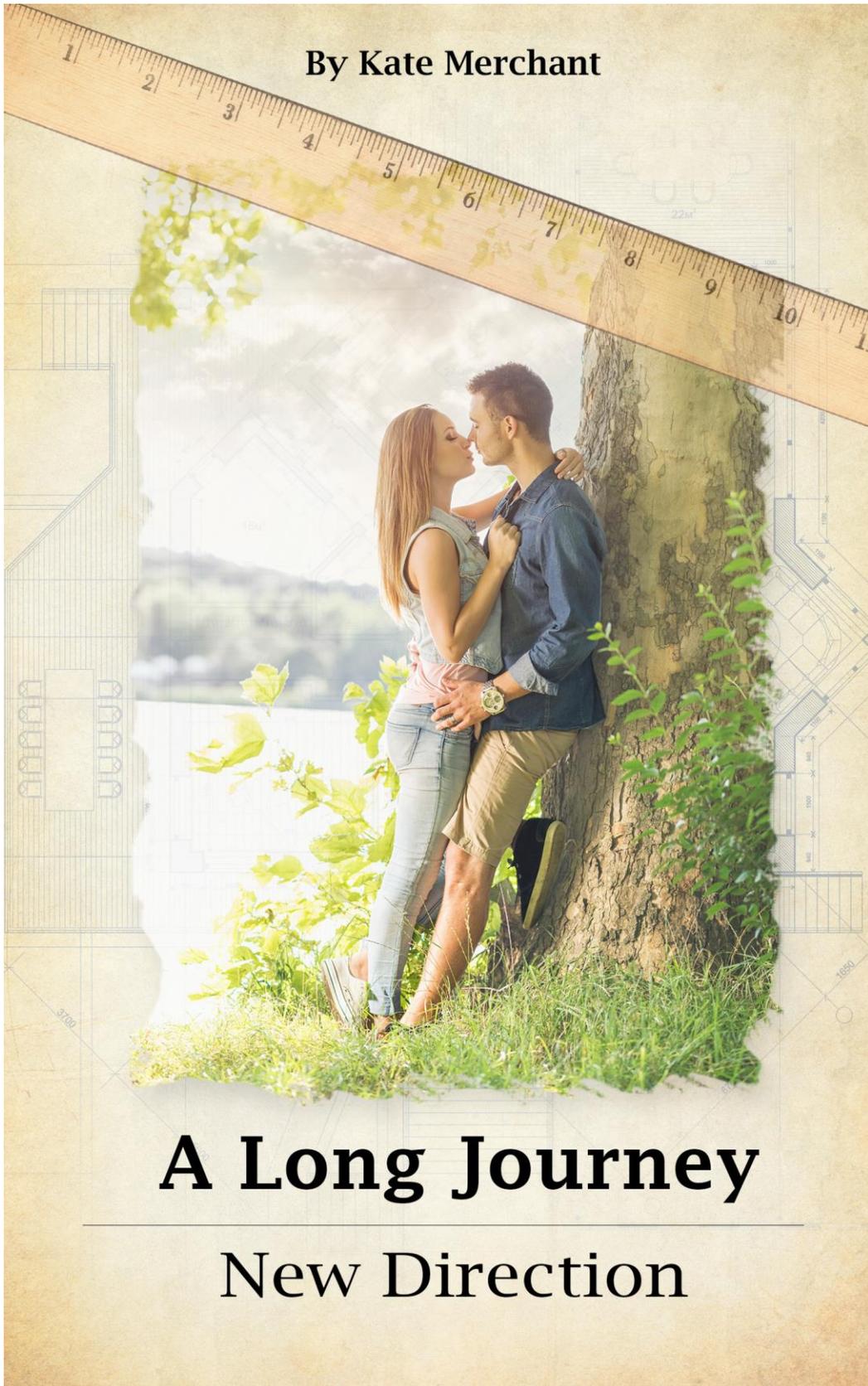


By Kate Merchant



A Long Journey

New Direction

Chapter 1: In all the restaurants she could have walked into...

Geoff's Perspective

Emma and I looked at each other as Sophie spoke to the hostess. She did not ever look our way. Emma started to get up. I put a hand on her arm. "Don't," I said, tersely.

"But that's—"

"I know who that is," I said. "What makes you think we should bother her? We didn't exactly end on the best of terms."

"That was ages ago. I like to think we've all matured a little, Geoff."

"What are you two talking about?" Kelly asked.

I got a look at Sophie out of the corner of my eye as she walked by. She was moving fast, so I could make out only her profile, but she looked amazing. She wore a white skirt suit with black pinstripes and a black top. Her suit jacket was draped over her arm, making her look casually elegant. She moved with a grace I hadn't seen during our time at Dowsford. Her hair had grown back to her shoulders and was layered a little. The biggest difference was that she looked happy, almost radiant.

"That's Sophie," I told Kelly. She knew all about Sophie and liked to tease me about the "one who got away." This time, though, her jaw just dropped.

"Your Sophie from high school?" she asked, shocked.

"The one and only." I took a gulp of wine to keep myself from grabbing Kelly's cigarette.

Damian looked at Emma and me. He turned to my sister and said, "You know what? I think Geoff might be right on this one."

I shook my head, thinking, *Big mistake, Damian. Big mistake. Never tell Emma no — it just made her more determined.*

Sophie's Perspective

I was running late to dinner. Lucy was already there with Chris, her fiancé. David and Jill were also coming, so that left Lex by himself until I got there. My meeting with the hospital executives had gone a little longer than I thought, and I couldn't get a cab, so I ended up on the Tube.

The restaurant, Rain, had been Jill's pick, and it looked beautiful from the outside. Walking in was even better. With rich oak paneling, light-colored linens, and fresh flowers, it

was really something else. Going to the maître de, I said, "Hi, I'm meeting some people. Lyons, party of six?"

"Yes, Miss," the young lady said, "they're sitting in the garden."

As I walked to the back, I got the uncanny feeling that I was being watched. I could feel the hair on the back of my neck rise. Lucy saw me and came up, so I blew off the feeling.

"How are you? You look smashing!" She eyed me up and down.

"So do you. Engagement suits you," I said, taking her in. Lucy was wearing her strawberry blond hair in a chin-length bob. At the table, she introduced me to Chris, her fiancé. After we finished with greetings, Jill signaled the waiter over so we could give him our orders.

I was debating ordering the pasta versus the chicken, when Lucy's eyes bulged. The same feeling I had earlier returned.

By the looks on Jill's and Lex's faces, I knew I hadn't imagined it. Turning around, I realized my instincts were right. There was Emma, waving like a lunatic, with a blond man, and Geoff with an extremely beautiful redhead. I really hated being right.

"Emma," I said, getting up. She ran into me, nearly knocking me to the floor.

"Oh, this is wonderful! What are you doing here?" she asked and looked around the table. "David, Jill, Lucy — it's wonderful to see you again!"

Lucy looked at her like she was crazy. Emma had known her only through me at Dowsford. "Ah, yes. You, too," she said, shaking her head.

"Oh, you must be Sophie's friend from the States," Emma said to Lex, who looked really overwhelmed all of a sudden.

"Yeah, I guess you could say that," he said, casually swinging an arm over my shoulder. I looked at him for a moment, raising an eyebrow. He just kissed my cheek and whispered, "Go with it."

"So, are you guys visiting?" Emma asked, pulling a chair up.

Same old, same old — she still didn't have boundaries, I thought. "I'm here on business," I said.

"We're moving back for David's work," Jill said.

"We should get together, all of us. Lucy, you too," Emma said, and then gestured to the man beside her. "Where are my manners? This is my boyfriend, Damian."

For a moment, I heard my dad snicker and say, "*What a punk. Boys don't have ponytails.*" I had to stop myself from laughing out loud. Lex had worn a ponytail in college.

Emma added, "And this is Geoff's fiancée, Kelly." Geoff glared at his sister.

Seeing Geoff hurt, like someone knocked the wind out of me. I couldn't explain why, since I hadn't seen him in almost ten years, but I guess it had something to do with Geoff being my first love and all of that crap. "Congratulations," I said politely, raising my glass. His fiancée was obviously evaluating me.

"Thank you," he said a little stiffly. *Geez, I thought, what's his problem? If anything, I should be the one with the problem.*

David nodded, almost longingly, at his former friends for a moment. I could tell he wanted to talk with Geoff more. Jill could also tell it. She gave him a little nod, and David said, "Geoff, we should catch up."

For the first time since coming to our table, Geoff smiled and said, "That would be great. Here's my card."

"Sophie, give me your card," Emma said. "Like I said, we need to catch up."

Great, I thought. Do I take the high road, or do I come off as a moody teen? Being immature looked promising at the moment. "Here," I said, reluctantly pulling a card from my bag. "But I'm busy with work."

"Yeah, Sophie's going to be designing the new wing of the Children's Hospital," Lex said proudly, almost like a boyfriend. Again, Geoff frowned, but then his face brightened.

"So, you did become an architect after all?" Geoff asked, genuinely smiling. Surprisingly, all the animosity that I had felt at Dowsford was gone.

For a brief second, I was glad he was proud of me. I looked at Geoff. Really looked at him. He had definitely gotten better looking. In fact, he handled manhood even more confidently than adolescence. While Geoff had been cocky as a teen, he looked settled as a man. If Kelly did that with Geoff, then all the power to her.

"Yes," I said, "at least that's what my license says."

"Grand," he said, smiling again.

"Geoff, we should go, and let them catch up," Kelly finally said, shooting a glare at her fiancé.

"Emma let's go," he nodded and said to his sister. "David, I look forward to hearing from you."

"Likewise," David said, getting up to shake his hand. There was a total bromance going on there.

After the Carmichaels left, Jill and Lex started laughing like hyenas. "What?" I asked. They had this eerie connection that sometimes made me think they were related.

Jill took a sip of her wine. "You gave Emma your card. You voluntarily gave her a way to track you down."

Oh no, I thought. Shit. Lex started cackling again. I looked at him, shaking my head. "What the hell were you thinking? You were acting like my boyfriend or something." I smacked him on the back of his head.

This time, Lucy, Chris, and David starting laughing at me, too. "Ah, sweet Sophie," David said, putting his arm on Jill, "so innocent..."

"He's here with his fiancée," Lucy said.

"And I'm here with my friends," I said, wondering what the waiter had put in their wine and why mine wasn't having the same effect on me.

"Do you want to be the pathetic ex-girlfriend while he's here with his smoking-hot fiancée?" Lex asked.

My eyes bulged, wondering when I entered junior high again. "You're right. Because a fake boyfriend is so much better."

Contrary to popular belief, I was single by choice, not because guys weren't interested. While I basically lived like a nun, I had dated a little and fooled around a few times. But I had a business that I was trying to start, and that left very little time for a personal life. I had spent too much time investing in my career to let a guy take priority in my life. The one time I had done that, with Geoff, it had blown up in my face. Never again, thank you very much.

"Either way, Bells, he wants you," Lex said, more seriously.

"Don't be ridiculous." My blush made a comeback with a vengeance.

"He looked like he wanted to kill Lex," David said, snickering.

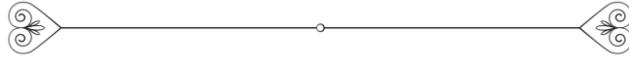
"Real funny," I snapped. The poor waiter was back for our orders. My appetite was gone now, so I just ordered pasta to have something to pick at.

"C'mon, Sophie," Lucy said, taking my hand. "Just forget about it. It's the first time we've seen each other in years."

I tried taking Lucy's advice about not letting it bother me, but the encounter disturbed me. The Carmichaels left before we did, but I couldn't resist looking at their table. A couple of times, I caught both Geoff and Kelly looking at me. She wasn't glaring at me like she had earlier, but she was watching me with a calculating look, like she was sizing up the competition. I hoped that Emma's infatuation with looking up an old friend was short lived.

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