

The Afternoon We Kept

By Sandra Jo

A free companion story to Plant the First Seed

This original work of fiction takes place at Harmony Café before the main events of Book One, when Grandma Vivian was still there to share an afternoon.

On the afternoon of Nora Bell's farewell tea, Marie's cake sank in the middle.

She stood over the cooling rack, still wearing the oven mitts, and watched the little hollow deepen.

"Perhaps it's resting," Julie said from the kitchen doorway.

Marie gave her cousin a look.

"You told me to find something encouraging to say."

Through the open doors, Marie could see the table beneath the pergola. She had laid out four cups, a linen cloth, and the small vase she had filled with flowers that morning. Beside Nora's place sat a card everyone had signed. There was room in the center for a beautiful lemon cake.

Marie looked back at the cooling rack.

"I followed the recipe."

"I believe you," Julie said. "The cake may have had other plans."

Marie wanted to laugh. Instead, she reached for the recipe again.

Nora was leaving the next morning. After twenty-three years in the little house around the corner, she was moving to an apartment near her daughter. By tomorrow afternoon, another family would have the keys to the house with the blue gate.

Since Harmony Café opened, Nora had come in on Tuesdays. She liked the table by the window, strong tea, and enough time to finish the crossword without anyone telling her the answers.

When Marie first began working behind the counter, Nora had waited patiently through several cups of very doubtful coffee.

"We're both learning," she had said. "I'm learning to order tea."

Marie had wanted this afternoon to say something she had never quite managed to put into words. Thank you for coming back. Thank you for knowing us. We will miss you.

She had been counting on the cake to help.

Grandma Vivian came in carrying a few sprigs of rosemary. She set them beside the sink and examined the damage.

"Is it cooked through?"

Marie nodded. "I tested it."

Vivian broke a crumb from the edge and tasted it.

"Lovely."

"Grandma."

"Lemon. Butter. A little too much worry around the edges."

Julie smiled, but Marie was already reaching for her bag.

"The bakery on Linden Street might still have something. If I hurry—"

The bell above the front door rang.

Nora stood just inside, her handbag over one arm and a small parcel under the other. She was twenty minutes early.

"I'm sorry," she said. "My daughter's managed to borrow a van, but we have to collect it sooner than we expected. She'll pick me up in half an hour. I couldn't leave without coming."

Marie glanced toward the kitchen.

"Of course. Come in. Everything's nearly ready."

The words came out automatically. She was still calculating the distance to Linden Street.

Vivian took Nora's parcel while Julie went to fill the teapot. Marie opened the door again.

"I'll only be a few minutes."

"Are you going somewhere?" Nora asked.

"Just to get your cake."

Nora looked past her toward the kitchen. The scent of lemon had reached the front of the café.

"Did something happen to that one?"

"It fell."

"On the floor?"

"In the middle."

"Then I should think we can manage."

Marie kept one hand on the door. "I wanted it to be special."

Nora's expression softened.

"Would you stay, Marie? I've spent the whole week watching people pack and carry things. I'd love to sit with you for a little while."

The bell gave a small, uneven jingle as Marie let the door close.

She put her bag beneath the counter.

"Yes," she said. "I'd like that too."

Outside, Julie was pouring tea beneath the pergola. Vivian brought the cake on an ordinary white plate, with a spoonful of strawberries tucked into its sunken center.

“An excellent place to put the fruit,” Nora said.

They passed the plates. The cake was tender and still slightly warm. Marie took a bite and realized how hungry she was. She had spent most of the afternoon preparing a table at which she had scarcely imagined sitting.

Nora untied the string around her parcel. Inside was a blue jug with a curved handle.

“For your flowers, Vivian. I’d like you to have it.”

Vivian turned it in her hands. “The one from your kitchen window?”

“You’ve admired it often enough.”

“Because you wouldn’t tell me where you bought it.”

“A little shop near the coast.” Nora glanced at Marie and Julie. “Your grandmother and I found it the day we got off the train at the wrong station.”

Vivian lifted her chin. “We found a very good beach.”

“Eventually. First we found a fish warehouse.”

Julie nearly spilled her tea.

“You never told us that.”

“You never asked about my travels through the fish trade,” Vivian said.

Marie leaned back in her chair. Nora described the two of them carrying their shoes down a stony path, certain they could smell the sea. Vivian interrupted to insist that the path had been perfectly sensible. By the time they reached the part about sharing a paper bag of cherries on the beach, Marie had forgotten the cake’s appearance.

She pictured her grandmother with wet hems and cherry-stained fingers, laughing beside this woman who would soon live somewhere else.

Nora reached for her cup, then paused.

“I found the photographs yesterday,” she said. “At the bottom of a drawer.”

Her voice had changed.

Vivian set the jug beside the flowers.

“Did you pack them?”

“In my overnight bag. I wasn’t trusting those to the van.”

Nora smiled, but her eyes filled. She pressed the corner of her napkin beneath them.

“Everyone keeps telling me how wonderful it will be. And I think it will. I’ll see my daughter more. There’s a library I can walk to.” She looked at the table. “But this morning I took my cup into the garden, and I stood there thinking about all the mornings I’d done that without noticing.”

Marie felt the familiar urge to reassure her. There would be new friends. New places. Visits back here.

She opened her mouth, then saw Nora's fingers tightening around the napkin.

"What will you miss most?" she asked.

Nora took a breath.

"Knowing where I am without having to think about it. Which paving stone tips when it rains. The sound the gate makes. Being able to come here and have you start my tea before I've sat down."

Her tears slipped free.

Julie pushed the napkin basket closer. Vivian rested a hand over Nora's. For a little while, they sat without trying to improve anything.

Then Marie said, "I'm going to look for you on Tuesdays."

"I hope you will."

"I mean it."

"I know, dear."

From inside the café, the radio began a song Vivian recognized. Her thumb tapped against Nora's hand.

"Oh," Nora said, looking up. "That one."

"You used to make me dance to it."

"You used to pretend you needed persuading."

Julie held out a hand. "Will someone show me?"

Nora glanced at her watch, then accepted.

Between the table and a pot of rosemary, she demonstrated a small turn. Julie went the wrong way and nearly stepped on her shoe. Nora laughed so suddenly that she had to stop and wipe her eyes again.

"Your other left."

"I only brought the one."

Vivian began clapping softly in time. When Nora reached for Marie, Marie moved her chair back and joined them.

They managed half a song. There was very little room, and nobody's steps matched for long.

Then Nora's phone rang. Her daughter was outside.

At the gate, Nora hugged each of them. Julie handed her the card, and Vivian pressed a parcel of cake into her hands.

Marie wanted to say they must do this again soon. Instead, she asked a question she could follow through on.

"Could I call you on Tuesday afternoon? About three, after lunch here?"

"Three would be lovely. By then I might know which box the kettle's in."

Marie entered it in her phone while Nora was still beside her.

They watched the car leave. Nora waved through the window until it turned the corner.

Back beneath the pergola, her chair stood a little crooked. A folded napkin lay beside her cup.

Marie reached to straighten the chair, then sat in it instead.

“I nearly went to the bakery.”

Vivian sat beside her. “You wanted to give her something good.”

“I would have missed most of her visit.”

“Yes.”

Marie looked toward the gate. The sadness was sharper now that Nora had gone. Then she remembered Julie’s dancing. The ache stayed with her even as she smiled.

Vivian slid the last small piece of cake toward her.

“Share?”

Marie divided it with her fork.

“Tell me about the train,” she said. “How did you end up at the wrong station?”

Her grandmother smiled.

“Well. Nora will insist that it was my fault.”

On Tuesday, Marie’s phone chimed while she was halfway through the café’s supply order. She finished the line she was writing, set down her pen, and made the call.

Nora answered on the third ring.

“Is this a good time?” Marie asked.

“It is. Wait while I get my cup.”

Marie pulled out the chair by the window.

A Moment for You

Marie's farewell tea holds laughter and sadness together. Nora can welcome the life ahead of her and still miss the one she is leaving. When Marie sits down, she gives Nora room to say what the move actually feels like. Later, a call helps them keep their friendship part of everyday life.

As you return to your own day, take a little time with these questions.

Which moment stayed with you?

It might be Nora asking Marie to stay, a memory shared over tea, or a promise followed by a phone call. What did that moment bring to mind?

Today, I will make room for...

Finish this sentence in your own words. You might choose a conversation, a few minutes of rest, something playful, or an honest feeling you have been hurrying past.

What small action would help you follow through?

Choose something that fits the time and energy you have. Perhaps you could arrange a call, set a reminder, or give yourself ten unhurried minutes. A small beginning is enough for today.

An Affirmation to Carry With You

I can care for what matters through one small choice today. There is room in my life for joy, for sorrow, and for beginning again.

Continue Your Visit to Harmony Café

Meet Marie, Julie, and Grandma Vivian in *Affirmations from My Grandma: Secrets to Sustained Happiness: Book One — Plant the First Seed* by Sandra Jo. The book brings together fiction, reflections, and affirmations about the choices and relationships that shape a meaningful life.

[Explore Book One on Amazon](#)