

FINDING ISOBEL

Mary Behan



Laurence Gate
Press

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without permission from the author.

You can contact the author at mvbehan.com

Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Behan, Mary, author.

Title: Finding Isobel / Mary Behan.

Description: Mazomanie, WI: Laurence Gate Press, 2023.

Identifiers: ISBN978-1-73449-436-5 (paperback) | ISBN978-1-73449-437-2 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Women--Fiction. | Family--Fiction. | Mother-daughter relationship--Fiction. | Adoption--Fiction. | New Zealand--Fiction. | Bosnia and Herzegovina--Fiction. | BISAC:FICTION / Women. | FICTION / Family Life / General.

Classification: LCCPS3602.E33 F56 2023 (print) | LCCPS3602.E33 (ebook) | DDC813 / .6--dc23.

LCCN: 2028917828

Copyright 2024 by Mary Behan

All rights reserved

Cover image "Finding Joy" by Gina Hecht

◆ ginahecht.com

Cover and interior design by CKBooks Publishing

◆ ckbookspublishing.com

Laurence Gate Press

6383 Hillsandwood Rd.

Mazomanie, WI 53560

Fiction is the great lie that tells the truth about
how the world lives!

~ Abraham Verghese, *The Covenant of Water*

CHAPTER 1

Isobel considered her options: call 911 or let Maggie die.

That morning she had dropped Oliver off at Maggie's house before going to work. Immediately she opened the door to the old log cabin, the dog rushed past her and made a beeline upstairs to the bedroom where Isobel knew he would jump on the bed and smother the elderly lady with wet kisses. She called out a brief hello and waited for Maggie's usual response. Nothing. She called again, louder this time in case Maggie was still asleep. She could hear Oliver whining upstairs, a high-pitched repetitive sound as if he were in pain. Stepping inside, she made her way to Maggie's bedroom. Oliver was standing on his hind legs at the side of the bed, one paw resting on the quilt, the other scratching excitedly at the air. She gently pushed the dog aside and leaned in closer, trying to detect any sign of a breath. It was there, barely disturbing the sheet Maggie had pulled up to her chest. The old woman's thin, liver-spotted hands rested lightly on the quilt, its faded blue and white squares barely visible in the dim light. Isobel stroked her wrist tenderly, reassured that it was still warm. She counted

the shallow breaths. In the space of a minute there were five, barely enough to keep someone alive.

Ever since Maggie had returned from Ireland six months earlier, Isobel had tried to brace herself for the inevitable. Maggie O'Connor had terminal cancer, and the magical interlude of the past fifteen months was coming to an end. She had visibly slowed. Nonetheless, each morning Maggie would grab her hiking poles and take the dog for a walk around the prairie, stopping ever more frequently at the benches Vic had placed along the mown path. After her walk, she would make a cup of tea and take it to the screen porch, settling into an old rocking chair with Oliver at her feet. Isobel had spent countless hours here with Maggie, learning how to embrace life. Maggie had given Isobel a home and a family and saved her from her demons. Now there would be no more walks, no more shared cups of tea.

Isobel looked around the familiar room. A large white envelope was propped up on the dresser with the words SUICIDE NOTE scrawled across the front in block letters. She thought about opening the envelope but decided against it. What would happen if she were accused of assisting this suicide?

An empty wine glass stood on Maggie's nightstand — its bottom caked with white dregs — along with two envelopes, one addressed to Isobel herself and the other to Vic, Isobel's boyfriend; these too she left untouched. Careful not to touch the glass, she sniffed but didn't detect any odor other than wine. She called Oliver away and with a final look around the bedroom, went downstairs and let herself out of the cabin. Walking the short distance to the guesthouse she and Vic shared, she paused to look at the sea of tall grasses interspersed with yellow and purple flowers that stretched westward toward a large pond. On this early July morning with the prairie at its

peak, Isobel acknowledged that Maggie had chosen the perfect time to kill herself.

When she opened the door to the guesthouse, Oliver was reluctant to go inside. Instead, he turned and began to run back to the cabin.

“No, you’re not going to see Maggie. Not now,” she said, calling the dog back.

Hearing the woman’s name spoken aloud, she let out a sob, then quickly suppressed it. Ignoring the dog’s plaintive whines, she shut herself in the bathroom. She needed to think.



Sitting on the toilet seat, Isobel closed her eyes and began to take slow, deep breaths, focusing on scenarios that would inevitably play out over the next hours, days, and weeks. If she called 911, an ambulance would arrive in less than fifteen minutes, its siren echoing throughout the valley, alerting everyone that something was amiss down the long gravel driveway that led to Maggie’s cabin. Despite the suicide note, Isobel was sure the EMTs would intubate and ventilate the old lady before rushing her to the nearest hospital. That was their job, after all. If Maggie regained consciousness and could be weaned off the ventilator, she would be sent to a nursing home. At eighty years of age and with a terminal disease, this would be seen as the kindest intervention, especially as she lived alone. Even if hospice was an option, Maggie had already made clear she didn’t want to prolong her life. Having seen her almost daily for the past fifteen months, Isobel was keenly aware of the older woman’s wish to die in her own home — a settler’s log cabin nestled into a hillside facing a tallgrass prairie in southwestern Wisconsin where she had lived for the

past fifty years. She would never forgive Isobel for thwarting her suicide.

Isobel calculated that if she waited a few more hours, time would take care of the situation. Although she wasn't certain how much of the drug Maggie had taken, she was sure the dose had been carefully calculated and would eventually have its desired effect. Working at a veterinary clinic, Isobel had watched enough dog and cat euthanasia to know what happens when breathing slows to the point where it can no longer sustain life. As the drug made its way through blood vessels, you watched the animal's chest rise and fall, slowing with each breath until the movement was imperceptible. The owner's crying typically slowed too, from heaving sobs to a single line of tears coursing down each blotched cheek. An image of Maggie lying unconscious flashed into Isobel's mind, and for a moment she had an urge to rush back to the cabin, to hold and stroke the older woman's hand just as she would an elderly dog drifting into its final sleep.

She tried to imagine life without Maggie. Ever since she had come to work for the elderly lady fifteen months earlier, she had been Maggie's constant companion. At the time Maggie had been recovering from a serious fall down her basement stairs and needed help with daily chores such as shopping and cooking, as well as chauffeuring to and from various appointments. This had coincided with Isobel's decision to leave her job as a school counselor, giving her both time and income while she considered her next move. What Isobel hadn't anticipated was how attached to Maggie she would become.

Isobel was adopted and had never discovered who her real parents were. She was born in Sarajevo, Bosnia, and had grown up in Canada with immigrant parents — a mother from New Zealand and a father from Serbia. Neither parent would

disclose any details of how they had come to adopt her. As soon as she left home for the University of Wisconsin in Madison on a tennis scholarship, her parents moved to New Zealand, and over the past seven years she had rarely heard from them. Maggie had become her *de facto* family. And it was through Maggie she had met her boyfriend, Vic.

A stab of panic riveted her. How was she going to tell Vic his favorite person in the whole world was about to die? He would never forgive her for not calling the EMTs. Another thought came to her: perhaps she could suggest that he drop by Maggie's place later this evening, have him be the one to make the discovery? By then it should all be over. But the image of Vic walking into Maggie's bedroom to the scene she had just left was heartbreaking. She couldn't do that to him.

Isobel opened her eyes and took a deep breath. She had made her decision. She went through the scenario carefully, visualizing each step as if she were rehearsing an episode in a TV drama.

CHAPTER 2

That evening Isobel “discovered” Maggie’s body. She made herself a cup of tea while she waited for the ambulance. Carrying the mug to the screen porch, she sat in her usual place on an old wicker loveseat facing Maggie’s rocking chair. It seemed impossible that she would never see Maggie again, never be able to unburden herself to the wise person who reassured her that she was loved. This porch was where she had spent hours reading to Maggie the previous summer. With failing eyesight, Maggie had asked Isobel to read aloud a package of old letters — letters she had written to her parents when she first emigrated to the United States fifty years earlier. These were an extraordinary window into another time, prompting thoughtful conversations between the two women. As Isobel thought back to that summer, she realized it had been a master class in how to live a full life.

Although Isobel was itching to open the letter Maggie had left for her, she decided to wait until the police came.



The next few days were particularly devastating for Isobel and Vic but especially Vic. Maggie's suicide was a shock; he just couldn't comprehend why she had left without saying goodbye. She had been a part of his life since he was a young boy, accompanying his father, a carpenter, to do repairs at Maggie's place.

All the joy had been sucked out of him. He had gone to work each day with grim determination, returning just in time for dinner. Afterwards he went outside to do chores — mowing the fire breaks around the prairie, chopping wood, repairing equipment — anything to keep himself occupied.



Vic was loading the dishwasher with his usual care, determined to fit one last plate or mug into the already full space. She had been waiting for the right moment to bring up a question she was itching to ask.

“What did Maggie say in her letter?”

The question hung in the air between them.

“It was typical Maggie....”

There was a catch in Vic's voice, and he cleared his throat before continuing.

“First, she apologized for not telling me she was going to do it. Said I'd try to stop her, try to talk her out of it.”

Isobel touched him on the arm, interrupting his rearranging, and took one of his hands in hers.

“She said she'd come back to haunt me if I didn't look after this place.”

He gave a quiet laugh, and they both smiled.

“Anything else?” Isobel asked, trying to sound casual.

“Just to make sure to contact her lawyer and her financial advisor. I’ve done that already.”

He let go of her hand momentarily and closed the dishwasher. Turning to face her, she saw that his eyes were glistening. He gave a deep sigh.

“I’m not sure what happens next. This place was all sorted out last fall. The land and the buildings are definitely mine; I got the tax bill in December — ten thousand dollars!”

“But Maggie paid that, didn’t she?”

“Of course she did. That was just like her, making it easy for me.”

Vic was suddenly silent. Isobel imagined he was replaying pieces of his past, which since the age of five had often included Maggie.

“What’s happening with Bill Breunig? Is he still going to build those houses next door?”

Isobel made a gesture with her free hand towards the neighboring property where Breunig had applied to the town board for permission to build six houses, which would be accessed by a new road passing within thirty feet of the guesthouse where she and Vic lived. Maggie had registered an objection with the county and hired a lawyer to argue her case.

“I think Bill might have given up on the idea. He’s not going to be able to buy that strip of land for the driveway, and the only other access is across his own property, which is way too hilly and would be very expensive. No. Breunig’s plan was all about Maggie — the road, the houses, everything. For some reason he hated her. I suppose he couldn’t accept the fact that a frail eighty-year-old lady could thwart his plans. Boy, was she tough.”

“So, what are you going to do now?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well...about this place. Now you’ve got three places to look after: the house on Highway 19 you’re still renting, Maggie’s cabin, and this place.”

Vic frowned, scrunching up one side of his face.

“I honestly don’t know. I mean, I’ve been thinking about it but not in any real way. I suppose I didn’t want to jump ahead — think about Maggie being gone.” He gave another sigh. “I don’t want to rush into anything just yet.”

“I know what you mean.”

Isobel let go of his hand and leaned down to pat Oliver, who was looking at both of them expectantly. It was time for his evening walk.

“What about you? What was in her letter to you?” Vic asked.

“Oh, much the same,” Isobel replied. “An apology because she suspected you would ask me to help you tidy up the cabin after she was gone. Sell off her furniture, like I did with the guesthouse last year.”

“You mean what you did when you first came to work for her, getting rid of her husband’s things? Didn’t she split the proceeds with you?” His expression changed. “Hey, there’s an idea. You could do the same thing with her cabin. I’ll give you half of what we get for the stuff, just like she did.”

“And where do you think I’m going to get the time, Vic Wagner? I start vet school in a month. And just in case you had forgotten, I still have a full-time job.”

“Okay, okay,” he said, raising his hands as if to deflect her anger. “But we could do it together. We could start this weekend. I know I’m useless with Craig’s List or whatever you used. Just tell me what to do.”

A bit irritated, Isobel countered, “I plan to clean out Maggie’s fridge this weekend, get rid of perishables, do a few

loads of laundry...the essentials. We could do it together.” She gave him a knowing look.

Vic slapped his forehead with the heel of his hand.

“Ah, shit! I forgot. I promised to help Phil with his barn-raising this Saturday. A bunch of the guys are getting together, and I swore I’d be there. I told you weeks ago, didn’t I? We think we can get it done over four Saturdays, maybe five.” He gave her an apologetic look. “I’m sorry.”

Isobel glared at him. This was typical of Vic. When it came to his friends, he was generous to a fault, willing to help out with any project. His skills were broad ranging, so he was always in demand. Yet, while she had never begrudged the time he devoted to Maggie, from mowing grass to clearing brush and mending miscellaneous equipment, sometimes she wanted to shout, “But what about me?”

“We could start on Sunday...?” he said tentatively.

“Forget it,” she replied, grabbing her coat. “I’m going to take Oliver for a walk.”

CHAPTER 3

Isobel pulled the copy of *A Sand County Almanac* from a shelf in the living room and withdrew Maggie's letter from between its pages. It was unlikely Vic would ever find the letter there. He wasn't much of a reader, and his choices tended towards Lee Child and John Sandford as opposed to environmental classics. She had read the letter multiple times in the previous week and by now knew it almost by heart. Yet, she found herself reading it once again, searching for answers. Maggie's letter had changed everything.

Dearest Isobel,

I'm sorry I didn't say goodbye. I'm sorry too that you'll be asked to help with tidying up after me. But we both know you're good at that! You're good at so many things.

I cannot tell you how much you have meant to me over the past year. You became my surrogate granddaughter, and together with Oliver, you filled my days with joy. Vic too, but he has always been in my life. You were the unexpected treasure. Despite the fact that my daughter

and I didn't have the reunion you hoped for, without you I would never have found her. More than anything, you helped me come to terms with giving her up for adoption all those years ago. That was a priceless gift.

I know you are angry with me right now. However, if you learned anything from me over the past year, you understand that I did the right thing. You and Vic would have suffered much more had I lingered for another few months, in pain and fading in front of your eyes. This way you get to move on with your lives.

This is what I really want to talk to you about — moving on. I don't think you will ever be happy until you know who your real parents are. Just as you helped me find my daughter, I want to help you find them. I've been thinking about this quite a lot recently, how you might go about it. This is one of those times when a bit of money can help. So I've put \$50,000 into your bank account. You'll be able to go to New Zealand and meet your adoptive parents. I'm hoping that when they see you, see the wonderful young woman you have become, they will be willing to tell you more. They are getting old too, and people tend to look at things differently when the years ahead are numbered.

This money is separate from what I've left you in my will. When probate is settled, you'll receive enough to pay for vet school. I'm so proud of you getting accepted, especially as I was able to watch your transition from an unhappy school counselor to an aspiring veterinarian. I wish I could be around to watch your journey, but I'll be there in your heart just as you are in mine.

*With so much love,
Maggie*

The idea of becoming a vet had taken some time to mature. While an undergraduate student at the university, Isobel had cleaned kennels in the veterinary hospital on weekends to supplement her tennis scholarship. On nights when the clinic was particularly busy, the residents and technicians often asked her to help them, and she found that she enjoyed working with the animals. After graduation, her degree in psychiatry with an emphasis in child behavior led her to apply for a position as a counselor at a local high school. It was a good job, but after two years Isobel realized her tolerance for helicopter parents and their whiny children was exhausted.

In the end, it was Oliver who changed her career. A year after she adopted him from the Dane County animal shelter, he'd been hit by a car, which broke his leg. Seeing the care he received at the veterinary school hospital and how devoted the faculty and staff were to his recovery, was all she needed. She left her job at the end of the school year. Soon after she met with the veterinary school director of admissions, who was very encouraging, outlining the courses she would have to take and the need for obtaining real-life experience.

As she thought back to that sequence of events, Isobel marveled at how everything had fallen into place. Once Maggie had recovered from her fall, she had let Isobel stay at the guesthouse for free in exchange for minimal assistance with housekeeping. Isobel took classes at the university and volunteered at a local veterinary clinic. She had met Vic at Maggie's place when he replaced the barn roof, and over the course of a few months, they had become a couple. On weekday mornings before going to work she dropped Oliver off at Maggie's cabin, knowing he was welcome there. The dog was company for Maggie, who still managed to take a short walk each day, hiking poles in hand. Each Friday evening, Isobel and

Vic cooked dinner for Maggie at her cabin, filling her in on the comings and goings in their lives. This was Isobel's family. But now everything was up in the air, and the one person whose advice she needed was gone.

Maggie had been right about one thing — moving on. Despite years of therapy, Isobel had never managed to overcome the feeling she had been abandoned, not just by her biological parents but her adoptive parents too. As far back as she could remember, she was aware of how little warmth her adoptive mother showed. Other mothers smiled and hugged their children when they picked them up from school, but not hers. Her father showed some affection but only when they were alone together, as if he was afraid his wife might disapprove of his misplaced allegiance. Isobel remembered a particularly emotional meeting with her therapist where she had howled “What’s wrong with me?” Her despair frightened both of them. Why had her adoptive parents not loved her, her mother especially? After all, they had chosen to adopt; they could have remained childless. Was she somehow incomplete — a secondhand child?

Now, there was a chance to find out who her biological parents were, perhaps even meet them. After all, she had managed to find Maggie's daughter and reunite them. That had been the defining achievement of Isobel's past year, and each time she thought about it, a warm glow filled her. While their reunion had not been as affectionate as she expected, she was inclined not to dwell on that fact.

Maggie's letter changed everything. Now she could go to New Zealand. Once her adoptive parents saw her and recognized this was their final opportunity to make up for years of remoteness, they must surely relent and tell her everything.

Her own efforts at finding a relative had been a failure, despite uploading her DNA to 23andMe and Ancestry.com.

She would go. The question was when? Could she settle down to four years of vet school? And what if her parents died before she had a chance to confront and question them? The more she thought about it, the clearer it became. She had to go now.



Dr. Forrest, the director of admissions at the veterinary school, greeted her warmly and gestured towards a chair in her cramped office. A slender, tall middle-aged woman with shoulder-length dark hair, she wore a white coat embroidered with her name. Her heavy-lidded eyes were framed by glasses, making it difficult for Isobel to get a sense of how the meeting might go. She took the proffered seat and smiled, hoping to insert some warmth into their exchange.

“You must be getting excited,” the professor said. “In barely three weeks you’ll be here for orientation.”

Isobel clasped her hands in her lap. She moistened her lips before speaking.

“Something has come up in my personal life — something extremely important — and I would like to postpone entering vet school until next year.”

She could hear a note of petulance in her voice as she tried to explain, and for a brief moment she was reminded of school counseling sessions she had held with difficult pupils. Noting the look of concern on Dr. Forrest’s face, her grip tightened.

“I’m very sorry Isobel, but you’ve left it too late.” The professor shook her head abruptly from side to side.

The blunt statement stunned Isobel.

Dr. Forrest continued, her tone now formal and professional.

“It’s true we grant deferments in exceptional circumstances. They are considered on an individual basis by the Admissions Committee, who then makes a final recommendation to the dean. But these requests have to be made within a month of being accepted into the program. In other words, by last May.”

Dr. Forrest leaned back slightly in her chair. “If you withdraw now, you’ll lose your place. You can reapply for the coming year, but you’ll be treated as a new applicant, and I cannot say whether you’ll be successful or not. It all depends on the strength of the applicant pool.” She paused before adding, “Perhaps you need a few days to think about this. It’s a big decision. However, the sooner you let us know, the better. We have a long list of students who are more than willing to take your spot. I’ll give you a day, Isobel, to decide if you can make this program your priority. If not, please give the next person on the waiting list the courtesy of a quick reply.”

The professor’s face was unsmiling when she stood up, bringing the meeting to a close.

Isobel had gone to this meeting assuming she would be granted a deferment, her only concern being how she would explain her change of mind to Vic. But now the decision carried far more weight. She walked towards the exit, blind to people passing her in the corridor. At any other time she might have looked for familiar faces from when she was an undergraduate student working in the veterinary hospital, but not now. Her mind was in turmoil. How could she give up her place? Surely she could wait until next year to go to New Zealand. Still, her mother had mentioned in her annual Christmas card that her father was not well. What if he died? What if they both died

before she had a chance to talk to them? She could apply to vet school for next year, but as Dr. Forrest pointed out, it all depended on the applicant pool. She had no idea where she ranked this year. Was she their top choice or their last? These arguments were bouncing back and forth in her head as she stepped outside into the bright sunlight.