

#1 *New York Times* bestselling author

DEBBIE MACOMBER



The Best Is Yet to Come

A NOVEL



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Summer 2022

Dear Friends,

Here's a bit of surprising news. No author is an island. We don't publish alone. Yes, the words are mine, and I personally wrote this book, but I have several teams of talented experts who strive to bring out the very best in me as an author. It starts with my own personal team who support me here at my office, along with my wonderful agent. And, of course, my publishing team. They each guided me through the many manifestations of this book. To them I owe a debt of gratitude. My attorney friend Lillian Schauer read through the courtroom scene so all the details align with reality. Thanks, Lillian! And my assistant, Shawna, read through multiple versions of this story.

I actually thought *The Best Is Yet to Come* would be my last book and that I would ease into retirement. But then I had a really good idea for another story. Writing is such a big part of who I am that I doubt I'll ever give it up entirely. The best for me is yet to come it seems, as Wayne and I travel. We bought an RV this summer and adventure awaits us.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Debbie Macomber". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'D' and 'M'.

Prologue



“All rise,” the bailiff announced, as the judge stepped into the courtroom. “Judge Walters presiding.”

John Cade Lincoln Jr. rose to his feet next to his court-appointed attorney. He’d met the woman only once and had agreed to plead guilty. He faltered as he stood. His balance was off, as his leg had never properly healed from the shrapnel wound he’d suffered in Afghanistan. He caught himself by grabbing hold of the edge of the table where he sat as a defendant.

His attorney, Ms. Newman, a young woman who appeared to be fresh out of law school, leaned close to whisper, “The judge altered the agenda from the clerk’s office so you would be the last case of the afternoon,” she whispered.

“What does that mean?”

“I...don’t know.”

It didn’t sound like it was good news. With the way his life was spiraling downward, he didn’t expect anything less.

The silver-haired judge with piercing blue eyes took her seat, and everyone in the courtroom followed. Cade watched as she picked up his case file, and silently observed as the prosecutor read through the list of charges against him. Judge Walters slowly raised her head and looked directly at him. Her eyes narrowed at the long list, as she closely studied him. Cade met her gaze and squared his shoulders, as if standing before his commanding officer.

Disorderly conduct.

Assault and battery.

Destruction of private property.

Resisting arrest.

What captured his attention was a gasp that came from the back of the courtroom. He knew that voice. Knew the woman who'd made it. His mother. Groaning inwardly, he dropped his head, humiliated and humbled that she would turn up on the second-worst day of his life. He sank, grateful to take the weight off his leg, back into his chair as shock waves rolled over his shoulders because his mother sat in this very courtroom.

Sara Lincoln, his mother, was the last person he expected or wanted to see. The last communication, if it could even be defined as communication, had been nearly six years ago. The conversation consisted of his infuriated father yelling, his face red with anger, as he lambasted Cade. After calling him spoiled and ungrateful, he made sure Cade knew he was a major disappointment, a disgrace to the family name. And that had only been what Cade heard before he slammed out of the house. He had never gone back.

Maybe enlisting in the army had been a mistake, but it was his to make. As far as he was concerned, the choice between serving his country and attending law school following graduation had been a no-brainer. From the time he could remember, his father, John Senior, had expected his son to follow in his footsteps and join the family law firm.

From the moment he was born, it was assumed Cade would become an attorney. No one had bothered to ask him what he wanted. His job was to fall blindly into his family's expectations. He'd been given no choice in the matter. It had all been arranged. Set in place as soon as he'd drawn in his first breath.

Unable to resist, he looked over his shoulder. It was indeed his mother, and she was alone, which relieved him but at the same time hurt. He knew better than to hope his father cared enough to support him when he'd hit rock bottom. What he did notice was the love emanating from his mother's gaze. He quickly returned his attention to the front of the courtroom. If she was sorry for that final scene, it was too late now to make amends. If she'd

said one word, one single word, in his defense, he could forgive her. Instead, she'd remained silent, and her silence had said everything.

He could only guess how his mother had learned he'd been arrested. He hadn't spoken to anyone in his family since the day he left for basic training in California. He hadn't even listed their names as next of kin on his enlistment papers, and he'd never looked back.

Six long years.

It went without saying: His parents would have nothing to do with him until he was willing to admit how terribly wrong he'd been. Once he realized his mistake, his parents would then be willing to welcome him back into the family fold.

Judge Walters looked up from the papers and again met his gaze, holding it for a long moment, as if gauging his character.

"Mr. Lincoln, have you been informed of your rights?" she asked.

Cade rose to his feet with the same awkwardness as earlier, gripping the table to maintain his balance. "Yes, Your Honor," he said, keeping his voice flat. His attorney had given him a rundown on what to expect. He had no defense. He'd been drunk and stupid. He deserved whatever punishment he had coming to him. He'd take it like a man without offering excuses or justifications.

"The court hereby accepts your guilty plea."

Cade assumed that was all that would be required of him. His attorney said the judge would accept his plea and then read his sentence. When silence followed, his gaze returned to Judge Walters, unsure and wary of what would happen next.

The judge glanced up from her file. "It says here you served in the military."

"Yes, Your Honor."

"And were awarded a Purple Heart."

He nodded and looked away. Like he cared. He survived, while Jeremy and Luke, his two best friends, had died. It would have been easier if he'd died that night, too. With every fiber of his being, he wished he had.

"What were the extent of your injuries?"

The last thing he wanted to do was provide a detailed list of the physical and emotional scars he carried. "I'm alive."

“Are you sure about that?” the judge asked, with arched brows.

The question shook him, and he raised his gaze to meet hers, offended by what she implied.

“Are you continuing with your schedule of physical therapy, Soldier?”

If she asked the question, she clearly knew he hadn’t.

“No, Your Honor.”

“Can you tell me why not?” she demanded.

“No, Your Honor.” What was the use? His leg would never be the same. He would walk with a limp for the rest of his life. A limp that was a constant reminder that he had survived, while two of the best friends a man could ever want rotted in graves at Arlington Cemetery.

“I see,” Judge Walters said slowly. “The same holds true for the mental counseling as well, it seems.”

“I don’t have PTSD,” Cade insisted. What good would it do to sit and cry about what had happened? Grief was grief. You learned to live with it and move on. No way was he going to spill his guts to some VA counselor who likely didn’t have a clue of what it was like to engage the enemy in a firefight and watch your friends be blown to bits. It wasn’t no, it was hell no!

“According to the list of charges, it appears to me you are dealing with a lot of anger issues.”

Cade was willing to admit that. Truth be told, he was downright furious with the world. The memories of that last battle engagement clawed at him like an eagle’s talons, his sleep peppered with nightmares that his mind insisted on tossing at him like a hundred-mile-an-hour hardball pitch. He drank to forget. To sleep. To escape.

Alcohol had become his only friend.

“I am hereby sentencing you to three hundred and sixty-five days in jail with three hundred and sixty days suspended, giving you credit for the five days already served.”

Cade heard the soft weeping sounds of his mother in the background. He refused to turn around and look at her. It was bad enough knowing she was here to see how low he’d sunk. He doubted his father knew she’d come. He would have forbidden her to ever speak to him again.

His attorney grasped hold of his arm. “Do you understand what that means?” she whispered.

No jail time. This wasn’t what he deserved or had expected with a sense of dread and inevitability.

“That said, in light of your service to our country, I’m ordering two years’ probation with mandatory participation in both physical therapy and counseling. You will make full restitution for damages and serve five hundred hours of community service.”

Silence fell over the courtroom at the leniency of the sentence. The prosecutor stood as if to protest, but one look from the judge and he took his seat.

“Soldier, do you agree to these terms?” the judge asked.

“He does, Your Honor,” the young woman standing at his side said quickly.

“I didn’t ask you, Ms. Newman. Mr. Lincoln?”

Ms. Newman leaned close and urgently whispered, “This is better than we could have hoped for. Agree with her before she changes her mind.”

“Soldier?” the judge said, staring him down.

“Yes, Your Honor.”

She pounded the gavel, and everyone stood as she left the courtroom.

“What happens if I don’t comply?” Cade asked his lawyer, hoping there was a way to avoid mandatory counseling and physical therapy.

“Then you serve out the three hundred and sixty days in jail. It’s your choice. It seems to me Judge Walters has taken a personal interest in your case. My advice is not to disappoint her.”

Cade muffled his distress. He should be grateful. If the prosecutor had his way, he’d be wearing an orange suit and led away in handcuffs.

“You’ll need to collect the Judgment and Sentence paperwork,” his attorney said.

The courtroom had cleared. Before he could reply, he heard movement behind him.

“Cade.” His mother reached out and touched his arm.

He pretended he didn’t hear her soft voice and, without another word, followed his attorney to the clerk, who was preparing the paperwork.

When he looked back, he saw that his mother had left. He was sorry she'd come, and even sorrier that they had nothing to say to each other.

Chapter 1



A teacher really shouldn't have a favorite student.

Yet Hope Goodwin did. She was consistently blown away by Spencer Brown, the awkward young man in her Introduction to Computer Science class. He was miles ahead of everyone else. Hope feared his ability would quickly shoot past anything she could teach him. When he first showed up for class, she was surprised. He was by far the smartest kid in school and destined to be class valedictorian. He didn't need the credits. Every other class in his schedule was at AP level. The gossip she'd overheard in the teachers' lounge was that both Stanford and Yale were looking at him. The kid was going places. Sure as anything, Spencer didn't need a basic computer class.

It didn't take Hope long to discover the reason Spencer was in her classroom.

Callie Rhodes, another senior, a member of the dance team and senior class royalty. She was far and away out of Spencer's league.

Hope hated that Spencer was setting himself up for a major disappointment. Every class, the kid gave himself away. Hope was convinced she wasn't the only one who noticed, either. Spencer seemed unable to take his eyes off Callie.

Hope wondered if he'd heard a single word of anything she'd said the entire class period. His entire focus remained on Callie, and the pretty teenage girl seemed completely oblivious to him.

Callie was popular, pretty, and smart. From what Hope had been able to determine, she was dating Scott Pender, the school's star athlete and quarterback. She'd heard Scott played key positions on the basketball and baseball teams as well. Compared to Scott, Spencer didn't stand a chance.

Hope's last period of the day was AP U.S. History, and both Spencer and Callie were in that class. Oceanside High was a small school with fewer than three hundred students. The size suited Hope. She'd been looking to make a significant change in her life. Living in California, being alone in the world, she'd badly needed to get away, to forget and move forward.

No state income tax was only one of the reasons Washington State appealed to her. It was beautiful and she felt sure she could find a good job there in a charming and friendly community. So she applied for teaching positions in several small towns that dotted the western half of the state. With her two degrees—a master's in education and another in counseling—she wasn't surprised to be hired by Oceanside High School. She knew she was a good candidate. In addition to teaching computer science and U.S. history, she also worked as a counselor in the afternoons, which wasn't an opportunity afforded her at other schools. It made Oceanside an even better fit. Students came to her with a variety of issues. Mostly they needed someone willing to listen.

Moving to Oceanside had been the right move. Living close to the ocean had always been important to her. Any home or rental within ten miles of the Pacific in California was way out of her limited budget. It astonished her that the small rental cottage she found in Oceanside was well within walking distance of the ocean and, best of all, affordable.

Her landlords, Preston and Mellie Young, were great. Preston operated the local animal shelter, and Mellie was a full-time mother to their two toddlers. For the most part they kept to themselves. Hope exchanged pleasantries whenever they met. Mellie stayed indoors a lot, so Hope didn't see her often, but that was fine.

The cottage was older, probably built sometime in the 1960s or '70s. Mellie had mentioned that it had once been a summer rental. Only in the last few years had it been rented out full-time. Given how old the house was, it was only natural that it needed a few minor repairs. The kitchen

could use a new paint job. One of the faucet handles was loose in the bathroom; the railing on the step was held together by a single nail. All minor details that would be easy fixes. Hope wasn't complaining, though, seeing how reasonable her rent was. Determined to be a good tenant, Hope would gladly fix whatever needed to be done herself. No need to give her landlords a reason to raise the rent.

Oceanside was the perfect place for her to escape, put down roots, and get a fresh start at life. Her desire was to let go of the pains of the past and move forward, breathing in the new and exhaling the past.

Following the last class of the day, Hope left the classroom and headed toward the office where she had been assigned a small space. Glancing out the window, she saw the football team was on the practice field. She noticed Callie on the sidelines with a few of her friends from the dance team watching the boys do their drills on the grassy field.

Spencer sat on the bleachers with an open book in his lap, surreptitiously watching Callie. The poor kid was setting himself up for nothing but heartache. Hope hated to have to witness what was sure to follow. She knew there was nothing more she could do unless Spencer sought out her advice.

After an hour of meeting and talking with a number of students, Hope left for the day. The football team was still on the field. One thing Hope had learned early on was the pride the entire community took in the success of the high school football team.

One advantage of renting the cottage from Preston and Mellie was that the school was a close walk from home. Because she had errands to run, Hope had driven that morning. These errands were admittedly a delay tactic for what awaited her at the cottage.

After stopping off at the grocery store and the cleaner, she headed back. The two-bedroom house had come furnished but was small. Still, it had far more space than the studio apartment she'd rented in Los Angeles. Although the functional furniture was outdated, for the most part, it wasn't an eyesore. Whoever had lived here previously had taken good care of the property. With a few minor changes, she could make the cottage homey and comfortable. However, that meant unpacking the boxes that remained behind the closed door of the small guest bedroom.

The room she'd avoided opening from the day she'd moved to Oceanside.

Hope didn't need anyone to tell her why she kept those boxes safely tucked away and out of sight. Seeing how much she'd lost, it made perfect sense. Those packing boxes contained the reminders of all the pain and heartache she'd suffered.

Determined to move forward no matter how difficult, she delayed just long enough to put the milk and cottage cheese in the refrigerator and stack the frozen entrées in the freezer.

Walking into her bedroom, she hung up the jacket she'd collected from the dry cleaner. Once in the hallway, she faced the closed guest bedroom door, took in a deep breath, and turned the handle before moving into the room.

The boxes were stacked three and four high against the wall, right where she'd left them. She stood on the other side of the single bed with the rose bedspread that reminded her of her grandmother's small flower garden.

For a long moment, Hope stared at the wall, gathering her resolve.

"This is ridiculous," she said aloud, to convince herself it was time.

Reaching for the top one, she set it down on the shag carpet, and with a burst of energy pried open the top. Peering into the cardboard box, she stared at the contents and swallowed hard.

Talk about leaping into the fire. Inside the very first box was all the pain she'd hoped to forget.

On the very top, carefully covered in bubble wrap, was the photo of her twin brother, Hunter, in his army Ranger uniform. Even before she removed the protective covering, she could see Hunter's serious expression, while his dark eyes, so like her own, sparkled with pride. He'd been proud to be Airborne, proud to serve his country. Hunter had always been fearless and headstrong. It was only natural that he'd think of jumping out of a plane, thousands of feet aboveground, as being a thrill when the very thought terrified Hope. Twins, so different and yet so alike. She sensed it was the same with the twins she had in her class. Callie and Ben, both seniors.

Tears gathered in Hope's eyes as she held the framed photograph against her heart. Hunter, her precious brother, had paid dearly for his commitment to serve his country. More than a year ago, he'd died a hero in some unpronounceable city in an Afghan desert.

Along with the moisture that covered her cheeks, familiar anger settled in her chest, tightening to the point that she found it painful to breathe. With every bit of communication between them while he was on duty, she'd pleaded with Hunter to be careful. She'd begged him not to take any unnecessary risks.

All they had in the world was each other. If she lost Hunter, then she'd be entirely alone in the world. He was all the family she had. All the family she needed. Born as twins, abandoned by their mother, raised by grandparents, Hope and Hunter had always been especially close.

With tears blurring her vision, Hope returned to her bedroom and set the photo of her twin brother on the dresser. Swallowing past the lump in her throat, she turned the frame so she'd see his face first thing every morning, as a reminder that he wouldn't want her to spend her life grieving.

The pain of her loss, that sense of abandonment, of being completely on her own, was too much. Hope needed to escape. Grabbing her purse, she headed out again, needing fresh air. She drove around aimlessly for a while, then parked at the beach. Being by the ocean had always calmed her, and if ever there was a time she needed to find peace and acceptance, it was now.

The tears on her cheeks had dried in the wind that buffeted against her as she left footprints in the wet sand, prints that were washed away by the incoming tide. Gone: just as her twin was forever gone.

Hoping a latte would help her out of the doldrums, she decided to stop off for one of Willa's special lattes. The one friend Hope had made since arriving in town had been Willa O'Malley, the owner of Bean There, the small coffee shop close to the beach. She felt a certain kinship with Willa. Most mornings, she stopped by for a latte, preferring a light breakfast before heading to the high school.

As soon as Hope entered the shop, Willa looked up from the counter and greeted her with an engaging smile of welcome. "I don't usually see

you in the afternoons. What can I get you?”

Hope ordered the latte and then took a seat by the window, looking out and looking inward, unable to let go of the sadness that had gripped her heart. It didn't seem possible she'd be able to move on without Hunter in her life. Even now, nearly two years since his death, he was on her mind every day. She felt his loss as keenly as she had when she'd first gotten the news. Against her will, fresh tears filled her eyes. She reached for a napkin and did her best to discreetly wipe away the moisture.

“Hope?” Willa joined her at the small table. “Is everything all right?”

The lump in her throat prevented her from answering. She nodded, wanting to assure her friend all was well, and then just as quickly shook her head. “I lost someone close to me,” she finally managed to say, although her words were barely audible. “Some days I wonder if I'll ever get over his loss.”

Sitting down across from Hope, Willa stretched her arm over the table and reached for Hope's hand. “You won't, not really, they will always be with you, but I can tell you this, the pain eases with time.” Willa's voice trembled as she spoke, as if she, too, had suffered a devastating loss.

Hope looked up. To this point, no one in Oceanside knew about Hunter or the reason she'd moved from California to Washington. “Hunter was my brother, my twin...the last of my family.”

“Harper was my sister, so full of fun and life with so much to live for. I miss her dreadfully. The world felt empty without her. For a while I was a mess, but time moves on, and that was what she wanted for me, what she asked of me, and so I did.”

Their fingers tightened around each other's, as if holding on to the memories of those they'd loved and lost.

A few minutes later another customer stopped in, and Willa left, but not before she leaned down and hugged Hope.

“The pain will always be there, but I promise you that in time, the love you shared will ease the sting and you'll be able to feel joy again. In the meantime, I'm here whenever you need to talk.”

Hope closed her eyes and took hold of Willa's words. Little wonder she'd felt an affinity for the barista.

Hope returned to the cottage, feeling worlds better than she had when she'd left. She wasn't back more than a few minutes when there was a knock on her front door.

She knew only a few people in town and wasn't expecting company. When she answered, she found her landlord, Preston Young, standing on her small porch.

"Hope." He said her name, as if that explained his visit.

She waited, certain there was a reason he'd stopped by.

"I wanted to let you know that as soon as I have a spare minute, I'll get around to repairing the railing on this porch and the faucet. I apologize it's taken me this long."

"It's no problem, Mr. Young."

"Preston, please."

"All right, Preston."

"With the two babies and my work at the shelter, I don't know where the time goes. Mellie's been after me to find the leak under the kitchen sink, and heaven knows I'm no plumber."

Hope felt sorry for the husband, who clearly had his hands full.

"We're desperately in need of volunteers at the shelter," he added, running a hand down his face, as if the weight of it was a burden he didn't need.

As soon as the words left his mouth, he froze and looked directly at her, as if seeing her for the first time.

"You're new in town, right?"

"Yes, a couple months." He should know, since he was the one who first showed her the cottage.

"Other than your students, have you had a chance to get acquainted with anyone outside of the school? In the community?"

Hope wasn't sure where this conversation was headed. "A few." She'd visited a few local churches but hadn't settled on one. The one person she felt she had connected with most strongly was Willa, especially now, knowing what they shared.

"Would you consider doing volunteer work?" he asked, his eyes full of enthusiasm. "The shelter is full, and a lot of the dogs aren't getting the

attention they need. If you could walk a few of them, a couple times a week, it would be a tremendous help and very much appreciated.”

“I...” Hope wasn’t sure what to say. When she was a teenager, her grandmother had had the most unfriendly Chihuahua that she’d lavished with attention and love. As far as Hope and Hunter were concerned, Peanut tolerated them.

“Part of your responsibilities would be to present the animals to prospective pet owners.”

“I see,” she said, drawing out the sentence. “And this will help introduce me to the community?”

“Oh, definitely.” Preston smiled, as if this was the opportunity of a lifetime.

“Can I think about it?” she asked, wanting to give the idea some thought. Her evenings were full, keeping up with her classes. If Preston had asked her brother, Hunter would have leaped at the chance. He’d always been good with animals. Even Peanut, who took to growling any time either of them got too close to their grandmother, had eventually been won over by Hunter.

“I suppose it could wait until morning,” Preston said, his shoulders sagging, as if accepting defeat.

“I’ll let you know then,” she said.

“Sure thing,” he said, and started to return to the house. “And I promise to get that railing squared away first chance I get.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Hope told him. She was fully capable of pounding a few nails. She’d recognized the problem the first day she’d moved in and knew better than to lean against it or put any weight on it.

—

Later that evening, after a dinner of an egg salad sandwich and an apple, she graded the pop quiz she’d given to her history class. It didn’t surprise her that Spencer aced the test. Both Ben and Scott failed miserably, and Callie missed only two of the ten questions.

Hope did her best to make history come to life so her students would feel they knew the men and women in the pages of their textbooks. History was her first love. The computer skills class, on the other hand, was a