

A mid-shift panic attack causes ER nurse, Elizabeth Barclay to bolt. Her job in jeopardy, a friendship with graveyard caretaker offers hope in regaining her balance. But a shocking graveyard discovery threatens to unhinge her completely.

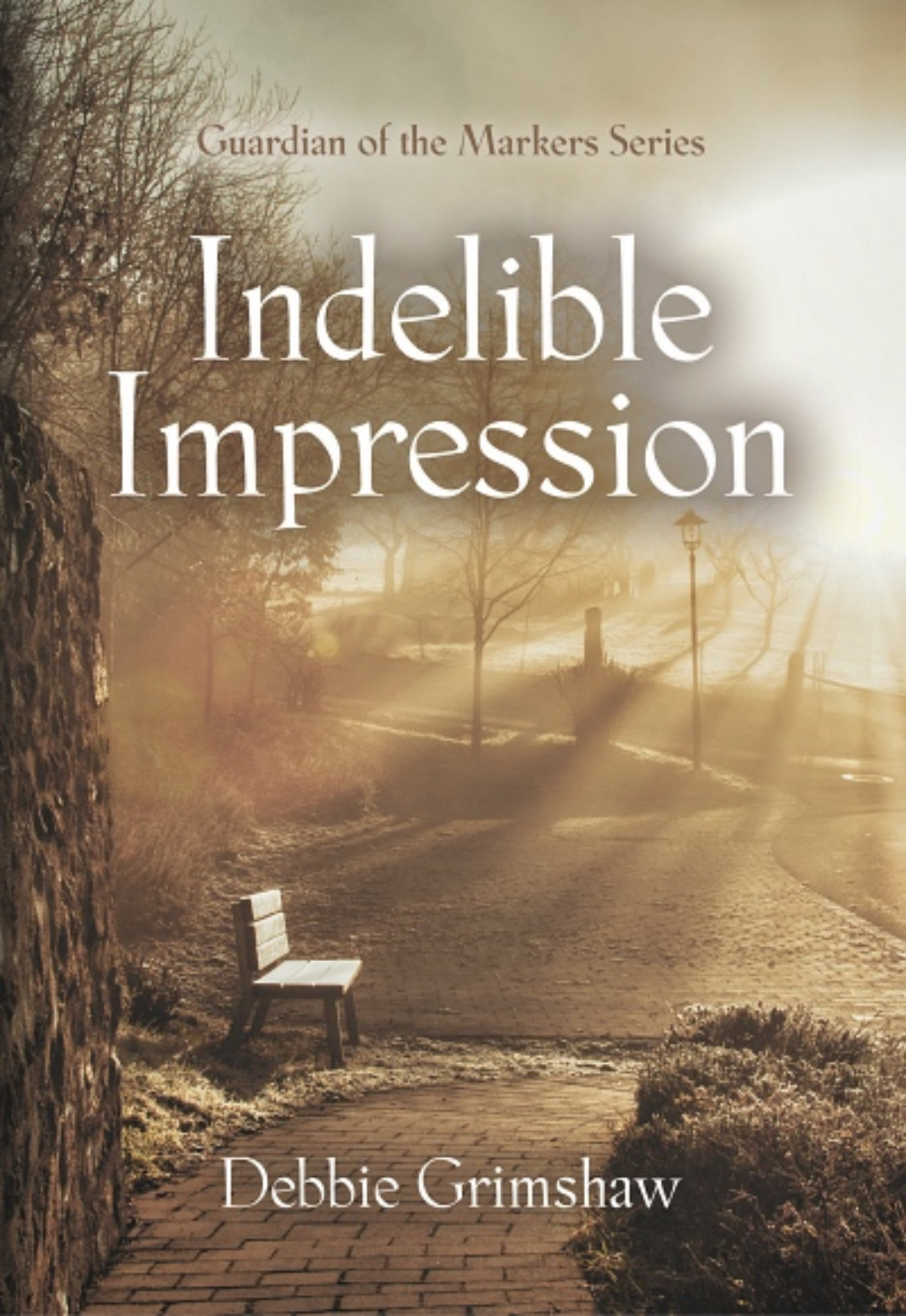
Indelible Impression

By Debbie Grimshaw

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The background of the cover is a photograph of a park path during a golden hour. The path is paved with cobblestones and leads into the distance, flanked by trees and a stone wall on the left. A wooden bench sits on the path. The scene is hazy and backlit by a bright sun, creating a warm, atmospheric glow.

Guardian of the Markers Series

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Chapter 1

ER nurse Elizabeth Barclay burst through the stairwell door of East Mercy Hospital and stumbled out onto the busy afternoon sidewalk of downtown Aurora Springs, New York. Catching the green light, she sprinted across the street, and headed toward her car parked four blocks away. The slapping of her footsteps matched the pulse of her racing heart. Half-way down the first block, her energy began to wane. Teetering, Elizabeth grabbed onto a wrought-iron fence lining the street to steady herself and doubled over gasping for air.

The stubby weeds in the fractured sidewalk smirked up at her.

Great. It's cracked too. Just like my life. Her gut heaved. *Not again.* Covering her mouth, she pushed back the threatening bile and stood upright on trembling legs. *Not here!* She looked toward the street where she had parked and caught the eye of two men passing by. *I'll never make it.* Elizabeth caught a whiff of the sweet lilac bushes that draped the fence and sucked in a deep breath. Her clenched stomach muscles eased.

It's so hot. Wriggling out of her navy sweater, her shaky hands struggled to stuff it into her oversized shoulder bag. *Think. No, not about the hospital!* Tugging hard on a lock of her chestnut-colored hair, she whispered, “I can do this. I can pull myself back together. I can!”

The fragrance of the heady purple blooms permeated her anxiety. The tiny, delicate blossoms were partly opened, and visiting bees hummed their appreciation. *A diversion. This might work.* Enticed, she was drawn under the curve of the arched metal entrance into the open manicured space of Oakwood Cemetery.

A massive oak tree stood in the center of the roundabout encircled by saffron gold daffodils. Its numerous branches, with springtime buds, towered over a statue of a robed monk with a bird resting on his outstretched hand. Focusing on the scalloped brick edges at the base of this island, Elizabeth found her shakiness dissipating. *Why, even the bricks look like little tombstones.*

Glancing at the path ahead, an ivy-draped building with a door plate marked “Office” caused her to

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hesitate. *I can't deal with people. Not right now.* She skirted past the building. Veering right at the intersection as a woman approached in the distance, Elizabeth widened her steps and shook her trembling hands. *Calm down. Find something new to focus on.*

She absorbed the dense, pale green carpet and was sobered by row upon row of cold stone monuments—a silent reminder of bygone entities. She scanned the names as she walked the paved roadway. Snyder was followed by Jenkins and then Parson. Slowing her steps, she allowed the peacefulness of the surroundings to envelop her. The trill of birds in the trees lured her glance upward. The blue expanse overhead triggered the lyrics of a song about smiling skies. She kicked away the tune and took another right-hand turn. *Right turns going in, left turns coming out.* She smiled. *That old hiking tip came back when I needed it.*

Epitaph-branded stone slabs in shades of gray, rose, and ebony weighted the landscape. Her focus was drawn to the odd smattering of angels, obelisk spires, and crosses. Name after name. *So many people.* Her sense of calm began to slip away. “No.” She stomped her foot

on the unforgiving pavement! *Ow! That was asinine!* She hobbled a step. *No heavy thinking. Stay calm. Reset your brain.*

At the next bend, smaller, simpler headstones reposed snugly together. Their dates reached into the mid-19th century. Most were a single-named, flat stone placed atop the soil. *1863! Wow. Must have been during the Civil War. Things have changed a lot. No computers back then. No cell phones. Just in medical advan—*

Her heart began to race. She clutched her chest and began pounding herself with one hand. *Why is this happening?* Breathing deeply to ease the rising acid, she exhaled slowly.

“I have to figure this out,” she moaned. Quickly she scanned the area. *Shhh. Keep it together.* After another big breath, she kicked hard at a pebble, leaving a scrape of dirt on the toe of her shoe. *Great!* Glaring at all the loose stones in the cracked roadway she kicked another, watching it slip into the grass. Running a hand through her hair and pulling on a lock behind her ear, she tried to ground herself in the moment. *Medical advancements*

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shouldn't bother me. I love being a nurse. So, what's my problem?

The growl of a lawn tractor in another section stopped her mid-step. *Time to go home. I think I can make it to the car now.* She watched the driver and the red bandana do-rag covering his head disappear behind the hill like a sunset. *That's what I should do, just slip away. Away from the hospital and away from whatever it was that set me off.*

Elizabeth backtracked to the gate and allowed her thoughts to bubble up as she marched to an internal mantra. *Run, little girl, run. Run until peace comes.*

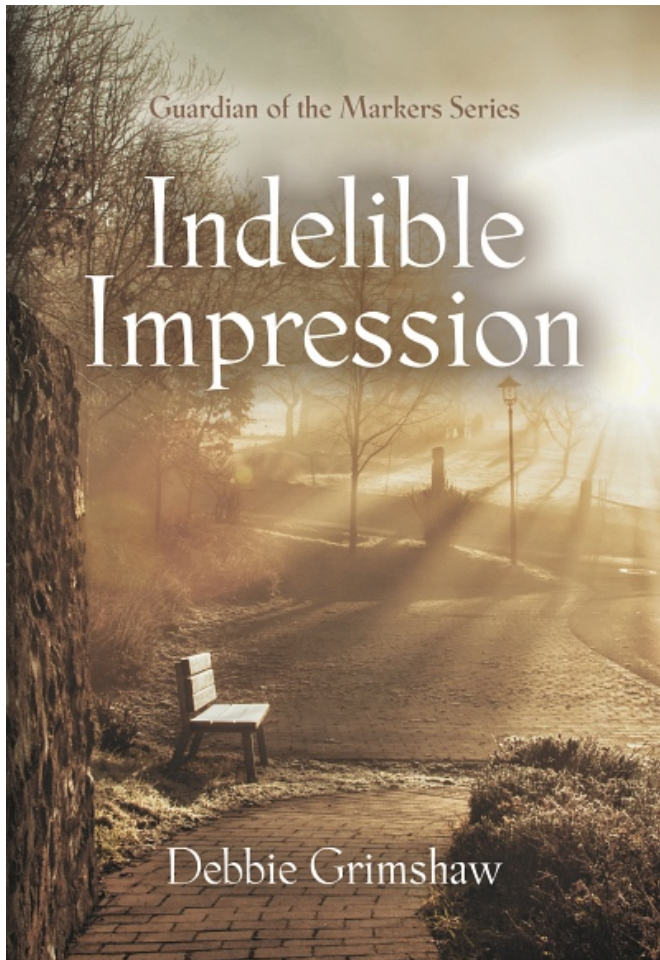
Work—her ever wonderful memory blocker. Work—with endless daily battles to conquer, long shifts, missed meals, aching back, and worst of all, bodies damaged beyond repair. Their broken images followed her home and sometimes invaded her place of refuge. Often the past just wouldn't allow her to sleep.

While she ran, she allowed today's incident out of the internal cage in which she had entrapped it. *A woman with a head laceration, facial abrasions, and a possible broken arm threw me off stride. I remember*

reading the orders for x-rays, and then I zoned out. Why?

I zeroed in on the door handle, and then... I was in the hallway. And then—oh no! There were feet near me as I hunched over trying to stop my lunch from coming up. Elizabeth moaned out loud, “Why?” She slowed to a walk. I barely made it to the washroom.

“Oh man,” she moaned again, quickly glancing around and wiping a bead of sweat from her upper lip as she had done earlier in the restroom. *I couldn't work!* The surprised look on the charge nurse's face as Elizabeth rushed past and out the door flashed through her mind. *Uh oh, I'm in trouble. How can I explain what happened when I don't know?* “Bah,” she growled. “My panic attacks are back!”



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